Crimson Rivers
Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/39760044.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M, Other
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Regulus Black/James Potter, Sirius Black/Remus Lupin, Minor or Background Relationship(s)
Character:	Regulus Black, James Potter, Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadowes, Pandora Lovegood, Bartemius Crouch Jr., Fabian Prewett, Gideon Prewett (Harry Potter), Peter Pettigrew, Evan Rosier, Euphemia Potter, Fleamont Potter, Mary Macdonald, Tom Riddle, Albus Dumbledore, Horace Slughorn, Minerva McGonagall, Lily Evans, various OCs, some others im probably forgetting to list
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Hunger Games Setting, Graphic depictions of violence - Freeform, Murder, injuries, Descriptions of Blood, Heavy Themes about Death, Minor Character Death, People will die be warned, its a hunger games au so there's really no way around that sorry, but rest assured that no one who gets a POV will die, Mentor Sirius Black, James and Regulus as Tributes, (because im evil), Peeta Mellark was a James Potter Varient, Katniss Everdeen was a Regulus Black Varient, it just makes sense in my head, Enemies to Lovers, (but is it really?), Romance despite all the angst, its about balance, love is like a flower that blooms even in the harshest of conditions, trust me on this, Complex Family Dynamics, Complex Friendship Dynamics, Complex...Everything pretty much, No Miscommunication, (this is new for me and what I would like to call growth!!!), but there are a few secrets so maybe not, this is going to be a long one and a lot happens so i can't possibly tag it all, there will be in depth warnings in the chapters, But overall, Angst, Jealousy, Death, depictions of mental illness, depictions of ptsd, and despite these things, Flirting, Fluff, Humor, sometimes Dark Humor, Falling In Love, Hurt/Comfort, Angst with a Happy Ending, good friendships, good family dynamics, basically you're gonna suffer but you'll be happy about it, Possible Explicit Sexual Content, (haven't decided yet)
Language:	English
Collections:	Marauders slay, Favorite Harry Potter Fanfics, In_the_meantime, harry and the marauders <3, the moon surrounded by the stars (aka the best of hp fics), TbrJegulusbabe, to be read list, regulus black supremacy, marauders <3
Stats:	Published: 2022-06-22 Updated: 2022-08-20 Chapters: 24/? Words: 226802

Crimson Rivers

by zeppazariel

Summary

Regulus Black was fifteen the first time his name was called at a reaping. He's twenty-five when it happens to him again. A lot has changed in that time, and one of them is that he's ready to do whatever it takes to make it home. Nothing or no one will stop him, not even James Potter.

James Potter has no plans to stop Regulus Black from making it home. In fact, his plans revolve around the opposite. He has his reasons, but he's made his choice to get Regulus out of the arena, even knowing it'll be the last thing he ever does.

Sirius Black was sixteen when he volunteered to take his little brother's place in the arena. At twenty-six, without the option to do it again, he has no choice but to be a mentor to his brother and best friend, knowing that only one of them can make it back out.

Two names called, a mentor on the verge of falling apart, and more secrets and grief between all of them than they know how to handle. None of them are prepared for what comes next, or how far they'll go to make it through.

Notes

Alright, so this one is going to be heavy, and long. You're gonna want to strap in for this one. So, let's get into it.

Firstly, you don't technically need to have read the Hunger Games trilogy, or watched the movies, to be able to read this. There are some similarities, but I've changed a lot of things. If you have read or watched it, then you'll see the similarities and differences with ease; if not, then it won't really change much for you.

To be clear, I haven't read the books in years, and it's been a while since I watched the movies myself, so it won't exactly be the same. I basically just took the plot and loosely used it for these characters and their dynamics. For example, I can't remember the exact ages for people being reaped in the books, but in this fic, it's set between thirteen and twenty-five. Another thing is, it's not divided up by gender, and I have gender neutral characters in this as well. Men, women, and anyone of any gender can be (and are) reaped.

In this, Sirius is a mentor because he's already been to the arena. Because we see his POV, we see how this affected him, dealing with things such as PTSD, mental illness, and references to past addiction.

This fic deals with themes of death in every way there is to depict it, up to and including murder (referenced and described), suicide (referenced and described), mercy killing (referenced and described), and just as a background part of the story because of, ya know, the whole thing where people are thrown into an arena and forced to kill each other.

There's also in-depth explorations of power dynamics, grief, and complicated relationships. This fic can get dark and heavy at times, and it will, but I will always provide proper warnings to the best of my abilities for every chapter. However, that being said, there are a lot of light and fluffy moments, as well as a lot of humor, despite the setting. And this fic WILL have a happy ending, because I really can't write anything else.

I didn't tag for Major Character Death because no character that gets a POV will die. I DID tag for Minor Character Death because people will, in fact, die in this fic. Characters that you will recognize, and probably some that you'll even like, and even those that you won't like. Not everyone will die, obviously, but not everyone will survive either.

This fic isn't for everyone, and that's okay. Absolutely do not read it if you're expecting a happy story from start to finish. I have a happy, long fic with queer characters and no death, but this isn't going to be that. This will be angsty, and complicated, and there will be gallows humor that not everyone will be comfortable with, as well as rough relationships and harsh realities paired with this setting. It gets brutal at times, so just be warned and prepared for that. Take care of yourselves first and foremost.

Warnings for this first chapter: references to death, references to murder, references to child abuse (yeah, Walburga and Orion are shit in any universe), a very brief reference to suicide (blink and you miss it), references to addiction, and plenty of angst.

If it's any comfort to you at all, this chapter has Regulus, James, and Sirius POV, so at least you know they won't be dying. Hope that helps!

Enjoy???

Misfortune

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The 84th annual reaping is supposed to be Regulus' last.

He's twenty-five, and he'll be twenty-six before the next, which means he'll age out. His birthday takes place two days before the reaping each year, so he has a rather fortunate stroke of luck in that regard.

James Potter doesn't, as it turns out. He's only two months away from twenty-six, and if only he was born just a few months earlier, he could have escaped his fate.

His name is the first that's called, and Regulus can't stop himself from looking through the crowd to watch James slowly push out into the open. His parents are quietly weeping. A lump forms in Regulus' throat as he drags his gaze from James to the stage, where Sirius is already standing, his jaw clenched as he nods at James when he climbs the steps up.

There is no doubt in Regulus' mind that Sirius is going to do everything in his power to make sure James survives the arena. He'll beg, borrow, and steal; he'll teach James everything he needs to know; he'll be the best mentor their distract has ever seen, and he'll get his best friend home. Whoever the other tribute turns out to be, Regulus preemptively feels sorry for them, because there is no life Sirius will put above James'.

"Regulus Black!"

That's the second time Regulus has heard his name called at a reaping—and here he was, daring to think he was lucky.

The first time he heard it, he was fifteen, only just, and he'd felt his whole body go cold as soon as he did. He hadn't even moved at first, too terrified to, unable to fathom how it had happened to him. It had to happen to someone, but no one ever thinks it's going to be them, until it is.

Regulus had gotten two steps out of the line when Sirius burst out and volunteered in his stead, only sixteen and ready to throw himself on the pyre so Regulus wouldn't have to.

Sirius had gone to the arena, and Regulus didn't think he was going to come home. He watched, day after day, as his brother fought for his life. He watched, day after day, as Sirius ran, starved, and murdered just to make it back. He watched, on that last day, as Sirius broke down when he was announced the Victor, laughing like a madman on the screens.

He was never the same after that.

Ten years later, and it's happening again. There is no one to volunteer in his stead this time, because Sirius is a Victor, and he can't. No one else would, and maybe even if he could, all these years later, neither would Sirius.

Regulus—just like last time—finds himself frozen, a horrible dread crawling through his veins like ice. The only thought he has is *why, why me, why this?* Whispers break out through the entire courtyard, and Regulus knows the reason behind it, what they're all saying. It's no secret that James is Sirius' best friend, and no one could ever forget that Regulus is his little brother. Oh, they're going to love this in the Hallow.

Next to him, Barty nudges his shoulder, looking at him with his lips pressed into a thin line, and so Regulus moves. He forces himself to, putting one foot in front of the other, feeling untethered from his body as he makes his way to the stage. As he climbs the steps, his gaze lifts to meet Sirius', and Sirius looks back for all of five seconds before his eyes sink shut, like if he's not looking, then it's not real.

Regulus wishes it was that simple.

It isn't.

He looks away from his brother, and he finds his gaze crawling to James next. For a long moment, they just stare at each other, and then they both look away all at once.

~•~

James is pretty sure he's about to throw up. The only reason he doesn't, he thinks, is because his parents are here. Despite all of this, Effie's hands cradling his face grounds him.

"Oh, love," Effie whispers, her mouth twisting.

"Mum," James croaks, his eyes stinging. He drinks the sight of her in, as well as his dad, darting his gaze between them both. He's never going to see them again, after this.

Effie swallows harshly. "Don't look like that, James. You can win. Do you understand? You can."

She would know. As the winner of the 44th hunger games forty years ago, at the age of a mere thirteen years old, she *would* know. It was her first reaping, one slip in the bowl, and no one thought she would survive—but she did. She doesn't talk about it, she never talks about it, and Sirius knows more about it than James does. Effie was his mentor, after all, and she helped him get home. And then, when he was eighteen, her duties as a mentor could be over, if Sirius stepped up to take her place, which he did.

James has lived in the Victor's Village his entire life, and Sirius has been his best friend since he was eleven, when he snuck over the wall behind the village and tumbled down an incline, right into Sirius. They had seen each before, of course, from afar, but they lived different lives at the time. James had personal tutors—a perk of being in the Victor's Village—and Sirius went to school. When they properly met, the first thing they did as children was fight (because they both snuck out and thought the other would get them in trouble), and less than twenty minutes later, they promised to be best friends forever—and it's a promise neither of them have broken.

When Sirius volunteered for Regulus at only sixteen years old, James had felt like something in him shriveled and broke off, never to be found again. He remembers that, remembers fighting so hard to see Sirius before he left, and he only got a few seconds to hug him before he was being dragged away, right out of James' arms. The last thing Sirius had said to him was a plea. *Take care of Regulus, James, please,* he'd begged.

James tried to, but Regulus was a hard person to take care of then at fifteen, and still is at twenty-five, James presumes. He's not sure what it is, but Regulus stopped liking him at fifteen. James didn't need him to like him, not to look after him, but Regulus dodged him at every turn. He took care of himself, mostly, no matter how much James tried. Really, there was only so much James could do. The only time Regulus didn't avoid him was the days they gathered together in the courtyard to watch Sirius in the arena. Just once, James remembers that Regulus had reached out to grab his hand, clinging to it as they both watched Sirius get attacked and then brutally murder his attacker.

When Sirius and his family moved into the Victor's Village after he returned from the arena, sixteen years old with war in his bones and ghosts in his eyes, James was the one who took care of him. Certainly not his parents, who have only ever been neglectful and abusive. Regulus—well, he couldn't take care of Sirius. It wasn't that simple. Sirius wasn't the same as he was before he went into the arena, and it was James who was talking him through the hallucinations; it was James who

got him to laugh for the first time after he made it home; it was James who made sure he ate, who pulled him back from the brink of addiction, who held him when he was falling apart.

James is his best friend, and he made a promise, and that's only part of the reason he looks at his mother and smiles sadly before whispering, "I'm not coming home, Mum."

"James," Monty says gruffly, his eyes shining. James' dad is a quiet man, despite his stature. A gentle giant, Effie has always called him, when she's not calling him *Flea* to tease him, purely for the irony. Fleas are tiny; Fleamont Potter is the opposite. He's a simple man, overall, a homebody and a scholar, happy to be with his family, a loving husband, and the best dad James could ask for. He looks heartbroken. "Son, don't—don't say that. If you fight—"

"I'll fight," James cuts in quietly. "I will fight. But, when it's the end, and it's me and him… I won't fight him."

Effie's eyes sink shut, her lips trembling before she tucks them in and ducks her head. She slides her hands from his cheeks to grip his shoulders, squeezing them. A horrible sound escapes her throat, and she sounds broken as she whispers, *"Please."*

"I'm sorry," James breathes out, swallowing harshly. Monty looks away, his jaw working as his tears fall. A shuddering breath leaves Effie, and she lifts her head to stare at him, her face sagging with sadness. James tries for a smile, but it trembles on his face. "Mum, Dad, I'm sorry. I can't do it. I won't do that to Sirius. I'm going to make sure Regulus gets out. That's what I'm going to be fighting to do."

"There are—countless ways to die in the arena, James," Effie says hoarsely. "You want to fight to get Regulus out? Fine, but if—just *if* he doesn't make it, if something happens, you fight with everything you have in you to get home, do you understand? Your heart—you have such a big heart, so full of love, and I never want you to lose that, but in there? You can't let that get in the way of your survival."

James nods tentatively. "Alright, Mum. Alright, but that's not going to happen, because I'm getting him out, even if it kills me." He pauses, then cracks a weak smile. "Well, it will kill me, actually, so really—"

"James, don't make jokes right now," Monty cuts in.

"This is how I want you to remember me," James whispers, and they stare at him, stricken. "This, right here, because what happens in there, before I'm gone… That's not what I want you to remember. Would it be too much to ask to not watch?"

"Yes," Effie says firmly. "You're our son, James. There is nothing you could do in that arena that would change how we see you, or how much we love you. We—we love you so much."

"I love you too, Mum. I love both of you," James rasps, feeling like he hasn't explained enough, like his words are inadequate to properly express how grateful he is to have them.

Effie draws him into a tight hug, and Monty moves over to wrap his arms around them both, and James closes his eyes and lets his parents hold him. Most people don't know when they'll get to hug their parents for the last time.

James does.

~•~

Sirius paces back and forth, listening to the quiet murmurs of his parents through the door. He can't hear Regulus respond, which means he isn't. Sirius can guess what their parents are saying without having to hear it, just clipped orders to come home, or not die a death that shames the family. No different than they told Sirius ten years ago.

Sirius came home, after doing shameful things to get back, things that still live under his fingernails and behind his eyelids to this day. He didn't die a death to shame the family, but since coming back, he's lived a life that sure has.

Well, that's how his parents see it, in any case. Sometimes it's hard coming from an extended family of Victors, only more so when you're a Victor yourself. Sirius finds it ridiculous, really, because it's not as if Walburga or Orion have ever been to the arena. Just Alphard, Cygnus, Bellatrix, and Narcissa—all who were Victors. Alphard hadn't handled the aftermath of the arena well and made many public scenes before eventually, essentially killing himself on booze and bad health. Cygnus had handled it well and raised three daughters who would too, if they ever found themselves in that situation. And, when Bellatrix and Narcissa did, they proved it.

After her games, Narcissa went off to marry someone in the first district, closest to the Hallow. Being a Victor, she could, and she could also take her sisters with her when she went. Bellatrix left

with her, but Andromeda did not. She stayed behind to settle down with a man named Ted, who the family didn't approve of at all. She's estranged from the family now, but not Sirius, who is always sneaking off to go see her and little Nymphadora, the cutest baby he's ever met. Walburga and Orion gave up on Sirius years ago now, and they haven't spoken to him or acknowledged him for a long time, despite happily using the benefits they get because he's a Victor. They still control Regulus, though, so they forbid him from seeing Andromeda, and Regulus listens.

Of course Regulus listens, because if he doesn't, it never ends well. Sirius can understand that, even if it drives him mental, because *he* never listened. Expecting the same out of Regulus is pointless. Regulus only does what he's willing to do.

It's going to get him killed.

Sirius' stomach twists. He remembers when he volunteered for his little brother, the first person to volunteer in decades, at least in their district. He had to, though, because as soon as he heard Regulus' name called, he knew his little brother would die. Regulus—at that age—would never survive the arena.

Frankly, Sirius wasn't sure *he* would survive the arena, but he did. Sometimes he wishes he hadn't. Sometimes he hates Regulus for being someone he loves so much that he would go for him. But never—not once—has Sirius regretted it. He will never regret saving his little brother's life.

This feels like being spit in the face. Like he was just putting off the inevitable. Because here Regulus is, his name still echoing in Sirius' ears, and Sirius can't save him this time.

And then there's James.

Just thinking about it makes Sirius' stomach lurch. His best friend. Fuck, his *best friend* is going to the arena, too, and Sirius can't take his place either. James is—he's Sirius' whole world, honestly. Without him, Sirius wouldn't be alive right now. Without him, Sirius wouldn't know what to do.

James is going into the arena with Regulus. How is that fair? What does Sirius even do with that? It makes him want to scream, to bang against the walls of some inner enclosure, to collide his fist into whatever is closest until his mind is quiet. He can't do this. He can't—he doesn't know how he's going to do this. He doesn't have a fucking choice.

Sirius is meant to train them. To prepare them. To teach them. He's meant to give them every trick,

tip, and tool to survive, then watch them go face down death. Sirius has never brought a tribute home, not once in the last eight years, and now his little brother and best friend are going to be looking to him for help. He doesn't know how to tell them that there's no help for them, that really, at the end of the day, it comes down to a person's desperate need to survive.

He can put weapons in their hands, teach them how to keep from dying of dehydration or starvation, make them memorize poisonous plants, and give them the general do's and do not's to better their chances—but the truth is, they'll only survive if they want to badly enough. Sirius won his games by strangling a man to death with his bare hands—not his first kill, or even his most gruesome—but he was starved out of his mind, halfway dead from dehydration, and bleeding out. The man had a knife, and Sirius had a stab wound. The man had the upper hand, and Sirius had the will to survive.

The man should have lived, and Sirius made sure he didn't.

It's strange, because Sirius thinks—and has always thought, since winning—that dying in the arena is a kindness, really. But that was before people he loved became tributes. Maybe it's selfish, because whether it's a kindness or not, he wants them both to survive anyway, and they can't. Not both.

This is like trying to ask Sirius to choose between his heart and his lungs. The heart stops beating if the lungs won't work, and the lungs won't work if the heart stops beating. They have to coexist; he can't survive the loss of either.

The door opens up as Walburga and Orion step out, and they both pause to look at him for a moment as he wrenches to a halt. All his mother says is an order, "Bring him home."

With that, and nothing else, they leave.

Taking a deep breath, Sirius moves forward and slips through the door, his heart clenching when he sees Regulus. He looks so small, despite being twenty-five, but maybe that's because Sirius is looking at him and seeing him as he was when he was only fifteen. Just his little brother. Always his little brother.

They don't talk the way they used to. They're too different, and at the same time, too much alike. Sirius has been through too much, and Regulus has distanced himself. Regulus is still in that house with their overbearing parents, and maybe they don't beat either of them now that they're older, but that doesn't mean their parenting has improved. Sirius hasn't been back home since he was sixteen, since he properly left and moved in with the Potters just up the street. He'd asked Regulus to come

with him once. Regulus refused.

"I have the worst luck," Regulus declares dryly, and Sirius stares at him for a long moment before huffing out a weak laugh and shutting the door. To anyone else, Regulus would likely look unruffled, just vaguely annoyed, but Sirius can see the fear flickering dimly in his eyes. He's trying to cover it, but Sirius has seen too much of that in his life to miss it now, no matter how distant they are. "I mean, I'm literally the only person in the world who has been reaped twice."

"Yeah, that's just shit," Sirius admits. He leans back against the door and lets his head hit it with a dull thunk.

Silence falls between them, heavy and thick. Sirius remembers when it was him as a tribute. Regulus had waited until they were alone before holding onto him and crying, begging him not to go, *begging* him to come back. Sirius remembers when he did come back, and everything felt—warped. The entire world was, and he thinks Regulus may have hugged him again when he returned, but he can't remember that. His memories are like a kaleidoscope, just fractured light, sometimes impossible to make out, and always shifting.

The memories set before the arena are faint, and they feel like something directly from another life. The memories set right after the arena, even a year after, are like wisps; he can barely make them out, and he doesn't know what's there. That's an entire year of his life, at least, that he can't even recall. If not for James, he likely would have lived that way forever.

The thing is, Sirius went into the arena and fought so hard to come home, completely unaware of what he would be bringing back with him when did. You bring pieces of the arena with you if you live long enough to get out, and those pieces still stay with Sirius to this day. James or Regulus will understand that, if they survive. One or the other, but it can't be both.

Sirius doesn't know how he's supposed to live with that.

"Have you been to see James?" Regulus murmurs.

"He's with his parents," Sirius replies, blinking at some fixed point over Regulus' shoulder. "I wanted to give them time."

Regulus scoffs. "So you came to see me first. What an honor."

"Don't," Sirius says firmly, snapping his gaze to Regulus, meeting his eyes. "Don't do that, Regulus. Your resentment, your bitterness, whatever it is—that can't matter anymore, do you understand? There's no space for anything else but your will to survive. Listen to me—no, shut up." Regulus' mouth snaps shut from where he started to speak, to protest no doubt, but Sirius has never been more serious in his fucking life. "You leave all of that here. Anything that could make you falter, that could get in the way of your survival, you let it go right here and now. It can't exist in the games."

"The games haven't started yet," Regulus whispers.

"The games started the moment your name was called, and they don't end until you're dead," Sirius corrects bluntly.

"Do you think I'm going to die?" Regulus asks.

Sirius' breath catches, his heart clenching violently in his chest at the mere *thought.* Regulus holds his gaze steadily, waiting, and Sirius doesn't know. He doesn't know if his little brother is going to die. He doesn't know if his best friend is going to die. He doesn't know how he's going to try to help them survive, knowing only one will.

Exhaling shakily, Sirius can only say, "You have a one in twenty-four chance, Regulus."

"Your best friend is one of those twenty-four," Regulus reminds him. "Are you going to ask me not to kill him?" He waits again, but Sirius doesn't know how to answer that. He doesn't know what he's doing. "Because I will, if I have to. I'm not going to spare his life and sacrifice my own just because he matters to you. I might not go out of my way to kill him, but if that's what it comes to, Sirius, I won't hesitate."

And, if it were anyone else other than James, Sirius would be relieved to hear that, to know that Regulus plans to fight to survive. But it is James, so Sirius' lungs feel like they're being *squeezed,* and dread sinks down in his stomach like lead.

"Are you planning on coming home, Reggie?" Sirius rasps.

"Yes," Regulus says firmly.

"Well," Sirius whispers, working his jaw, then he gives a tight nod and reaches for the door, "I suppose I should go see him, then, since you're so willing to send him to his grave."

"Are you willing to send me to mine, for him?" Regulus retorts sharply, a muscle in his cheek twitching as he clenches his jaw. His eyes are cold. They always are, these days.

Sirius turns around, opens the door, and walks out.

James isn't too far away, and Sirius arrives just as Effie and Monty are being escorted out. They've both been crying profusely, that much is obvious, and Sirius wants to go to them, call out for their attention, and find some way to make this better. He can't, though, so he stays back, letting them sweep away without noticing him.

As soon as James looks up to see Sirius, he moves forward to snatch him into a hug. It takes everything in Sirius not to break down crying, but he refuses, because it's not him about to be thrown into the arena—just two of the people he loves most in this world. James holds onto him like he'll never get another chance, and Sirius… Sirius knows what that means.

"No," Sirius croaks as he backs away, as if he's been stung. He shakes his head, unwilling to face it. "No, James, don't you fucking dare. Don't—"

"Stop," James cuts in gently, reaching out to grab his shoulders and meet his gaze. "It's not up for debate, Sirius. I'm going to get him home, do you understand?"

Sirius hears the whimper that falls out of his mouth, and the worst part is, this isn't even all that surprising. Of course James would do this. *Of course* he would, because he's selfless and golden, because he's *good.* Not necessarily out of the kindness of his heart—even if there's plenty in there—but just because he knows what he will and won't be able to live with. His morals, his sense of what's right—he'll die for them.

In the arena, there is no sense of what's right, or morals. It's survival, and that's it. You have to do what it takes to survive, even when what it takes is the worst thing you can imagine. One split second of hesitation because you want to be good is how you die in the arena. Good doesn't exist there, and if it tries to, it's quickly snuffed out. James isn't—he isn't cut out for things like that. He's bright and loving, despite this shithole of a world, and he cares about things and people more than anyone Sirius has ever known.

That's going to get him killed.

Helplessly, Sirius thinks about the difference between James and Regulus, how one didn't hesitate to tell him that he wouldn't sacrifice himself, while the other didn't hesitate to tell him the exact opposite. Sirius can't stomach it.

"James," Sirius chokes out.

"I said it wasn't a debate, and don't—" James takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "He's your little brother."

"You're my best friend."

"Exactly. It's one of the reasons I've made this decision."

Sirius flinches. "You can't—"

"I said *one,"* James interrupts, holding his gaze. "Just one among many, Sirius. This isn't on you, alright? And we're not going to talk about it. You're going to get me ready, and I'm going to go in there and get Regulus home, and that's it. Don't for a second think I'll regret this. It's my choice, and you're going to respect it, do you understand? That's all I'm asking you to do. Just respect it."

I can't, Sirius thinks. *Thank you,* Sirius thinks. *I want both of you to come home,* Sirius thinks. *I don't know how I'm supposed to do this,* Sirius thinks. And, in the end, Sirius says nothing.

James pulls him back into a hug until, for the second time in a role-reversal Sirius could have never prepared himself for, he's being yanked right out of James' arms.

Chapter End Notes

> This fic isn't finished, but I've written pretty far ahead (I'm already 80k words in, so there's that), and I know exactly how it's going to go. It will be finished, that I can assure you.
>
> I won't be pressuring myself to update multiple times a week. I've toned it down to

once a week (unless I get too excited and give in, because I have zero self-control), so I'll be posting today to get this first chapter out, then every Saturday. If I need to take extra time, I will, but I'll warn beforehand. (It most likely won't be a problem; I'm usually consistent. But hey, you never know, and I'm trying to stop putting too much pressure on myself anymore.)

So, let me know what you thought, and I'll see you on Saturday, then every Saturday following <3

The Hallow

Chapter Notes

hello again!

warnings for this chapter: general themes and topics of death (considering the whole arena thing), references to torture, and im pretty sure that's it. this chapter is fairly mild and mostly just character introductions. you're about to see some familiar faces ;)

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Well, at least there are perks," James says with faux cheer, reaching out to pluck a tiny lemon tart off the table that's full of food that's surely exquisite.

Regulus resists the urge to roll his eyes. Of course James would try to look on the bright side. He's so annoyingly positive, Regulus hates him. He's hated him for years.

Not all of them, admittedly, but years nonetheless.

Sirius looks tired. He's not eating, and neither is Regulus. The train continues on, and the only one who has spoken is James. Regulus looks at him and wonders how he can manage to act like things are fine. Does he look at Regulus and wonder if he'll have to kill him, the way Regulus looks at him and wonders if he even can? Nothing about this is fine.

"No, really, you have to have one of these," James declares with his mouth full, eyes wide as he waves the tart at them.

"Well, this is all very...somber," Pandora says as she comes sweeping into the train car, her lips pursing. She's a Hallow through and through, her eccentric style loud and dramatic. Her voice, despite being the one to call his name at the reaping—the reaper, if you will—is very soothing.

Regulus leans back in his chair and says, flatly, "Well, death is a somber subject, generally, except to the Hallows, I suppose. James and I are going to be knocking on death's door soon enough, so you'll forgive us for being a bit...maudlin."

"Death is a somber subject to us, too," Pandora tells him with a frown, her eyebrows tugging together.

"Oh, how shocking," Regulus replies, tilting his head in mock confusion. "I thought you Hallows thrived on that sort of thing, but only when it's people like us, right?"

Pandora presses her lips into a thin line, looking ridiculously hurt, and Regulus doesn't regret it. She sniffs in offense and narrows her eyes at him. "You know, with your attitude, I don't really expect you to get many sponsors, Regulus."

"Well, that's more Sirius' job than mine," Regulus mutters.

"You have to give me something to work with, Reg," Sirius says wearily, his gaze fixed on the window as he watches the world outside whip past them. "I can't present something to the sponsors if you won't give them something to like."

"I don't really care," Regulus admits, because he doesn't.

Sirius' gaze snaps over to him. "You need to care. Sponsors can save your life in the arena. I would be dead if it wasn't for the sponsors I had and Effie's brilliant management of them, but I was charismatic. You…" Sirius makes a face, and Regulus scowls. Sirius snaps his fingers and points at James. "Now, him? It'll be easy to get sponsors for him. He's charming, he's kind, he knows how to make people like him. It'll be like taking candy from a baby. But *you?* I mean, you never smile, and you're just—you're really fucking mean, and grumpy, and miserable. People aren't going to like that."

"So, what I'm hearing is, to get sponsors, I'm not allowed to be...myself?" Regulus asks in disbelief.

"Yes, exactly," Sirius replies promptly, the prick. "Be like James."

Regulus glares at him. "I'm *nothing* like James."

"Yes, as we've established, which is the problem," Sirius tells him, utterly oblivious to the way those words are a knife sinking into Regulus' gut. Regulus knows that already. Regulus has known that for a long time.

"I think—I don't know," James mumbles, looking down at the plate of tarts. "I mean, *I* would sponsor him."

"You would sponsor everyone," Sirius says, heaving a sigh. He tips his head towards Regulus. "Even the least desirable ones."

"Oh, and *James* is desirable?" Regulus retorts sardonically.

James plants his elbow on the table and leans closer to Regulus, lips curling up. "Are you claiming I'm not? You wouldn't say I'm desirable?"

"I'd say the only desire I feel is for you to go away," Regulus tells him, arching an eyebrow.

"Well, that's not very nice."

"As we've just established, I'm not a very nice person."

"That's not a very desirable trait, you know," James says.

Regulus hums. "And yet, you'd sponsor me."

"Yes, well, I'm biased," James murmurs, lazily reaching down to pluck up another tart, holding it out to Regulus. "Here. It's sour and bitter, just like you."

Regulus takes the tart, then—without looking—flicks his wrist and lobs it directly at Sirius' head. By the yelp that follows, his aim is still true. James proceeds to bust out laughing so hard that he's wheezing, and even Pandora releases a giggle as Sirius starts complaining about the tart getting in his hair.

For one moment, the inevitability of what's ahead doesn't feel so crushing, and Regulus would like to exist here forever. It's a childish notion, wanting to wrap himself up in one moment and hide away from the world, but he can't shake the urge.

It shakes him, though, because James' laughter fades as he looks out the window with a quiet, "Shit, look at that."

Following his gaze, Regulus can see the Hallow coming into view over the hill as they rise on the tracks, so much closer than he was prepared for it to be. It's a fortress, frankly. A city, yes, but an impenetrable one nonetheless. At the center, the largest building is a castle, rising high above every other building with slanted rooftops and towers that come to a point. James slowly stands up and approaches the window to stare in wonder, but Regulus refuses to be moved.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Pandora murmurs.

It is, but Regulus would rather bite his tongue off than admit that. He's never felt it so starkly before, the utter misfortune of not being born in the Hallow, but it strikes him now just how genuinely unfortunate it is. Anyone born inside the Hallow is protected, forever safe, never living in fear of being always so close to impending doom or under the Hallow's control, at least not so obviously. His eyes crawl to Sirius.

Sirius is looking at the Hallow with a bitter twist to his lips, a haunted echo of the past flashing in his eyes. The most beautiful place anyone has ever seen, and Sirius looks at it as if it's made from evil. Regulus is and has always been influenced by his brother, no matter how much he's fought that instinct, but it's no use, especially not here and now. Just from that, from the look in Sirius' eyes, Regulus doesn't trust it. He comforts himself with the fact that he wouldn't have either way, but Sirius' reaction does cement the feeling.

"Oh!" James blurts out, surprised, and Regulus swivels his head to see that the train has slowed down quite a bit and there are people outside it, running along it, screaming and cheering like new celebrities are being brought in.

They're all Hallows, there's no denying that. The sheer disconnect from the underlying horror of all this is the real finalizing factor on that, but it's the odd mixture of styles that mostly gives it away. People in cloaks, robes, strange hats, gaudy colors—it's all enough to make Regulus' stomach churn. The smiles and muffled shouts of praise only makes that sensation worse, and Regulus resists the urge to snap at James to come sit down, especially when he starts *waving at them.*

"Don't look so agitated," Sirius murmurs, his expression smoothed out as Regulus meets his eyes. He inclines his head towards James. "The games are on, remember? And it looks like he knows how to play."

"I don't want to play this part," Regulus grits out.

"Then die," Sirius replies.

Regulus grinds his teeth, but Sirius doesn't waver, not one bit. Finally, with a harsh exhale through his nose, Regulus shoves his chair back and moves over to approach the window next to James with his arms crossed. No matter how he tries, he can't get his expression to fix into something even vaguely open and warm, only just managing to make his face blank.

"How can you stand yourself, doing that?" Regulus asks quietly, flicking his gaze to James.

"They don't know," James replies, his smile never faltering as he waves like he's eager to make new friends. "Just as we've been conditioned, so have they, Regulus. It's not really their fault, if you think about it. They didn't make the games."

"They watch them. They love them."

"Yes, just as they were taught to. Just as we watch them. Just as we were taught to dread them."

Regulus shakes his head. "How can you care about them? Even *them?* They'll love us, then weep when we die, then forget we ever existed when the next comes along."

"Well, if the goal is to not die, then there's not much of a problem, is there?" James asks lightly, briefly glancing at him.

"Is that your goal, then?"

"Isn't that everyone's?"

"Do you expect to live to the end?" Regulus murmurs.

James just keeps waving as he says, "I intend to."

"I have unfortunate news for you," Regulus informs him, keeping his voice low as he turns his gaze back to the crowds they go past. "You're not going to make it to the end, even if it's by my hand, James. No matter how important to Sirius you are, I'll do what needs to be done."

"Oh, will you?" James says, his hand pressing up against the glass as he gives up all pretense and turns his head to look directly at Regulus. There's a sparkle in his eyes, and his grin doesn't fade even in an inch. If anything, Regulus can see it becoming more genuine. "So will I, you know. That's exactly my plan—to do what needs to be done."

"I won't hesitate," Regulus warns him.

"Not even for a second?" James challenges, his smile softening until it's more sad than anything else, and Regulus…

Regulus hesitates for a second, one too long, and James' smile grows again as he turns to start waving once more.

Heart sinking, Regulus goes back to sit down.

~•~

"You'll be fine," Sirius assures James. "They're just going to get you cleaned up and pretty to parade you around as an introduction. I think—well, Pandora says we've got a good team this year, so I'll take her word for it. I need to go do some snooping, but I'll see you and Reggie later, yeah?"

James, who feels very out of his depth, and like things are going too fast for him to keep up with, only manages to blurt out, "Er, yeah," before Sirius is darting off.

James feels rather like his safety vest has been taken from him.

He hardly gets to fret for long before he and Regulus are being led away in separate directions. James looks back over his shoulder and is surprised to find Regulus also glancing back at him. Of course, as soon as he catches James catching him, he turns away and doesn't look back again.

"Ah, marvelous," a cheerful voice chirps as James is led into a room. There's a man there with bright red hair styled into a mullet-mohawk fusion that looks quite good, actually. "The name's Fabian. You're my doll, and the other tribute is my brother's, Gideon. Come, come, get naked."

"What?" James blurts out, eyes bulging.

"Oh, no need for modesty," Fabian assures him. "You're clearly giving me plenty to work with." He pauses, then reaches up and smacks his forehead. "Goodness, sorry, I'm rushing the whole process. You're hardly comfortable with me yet, are you? Sorry, sorry, it's just that I don't get a lot of time with you, sadly. Here, I promise I won't be looking. Well, no, that's a lie; it's literally my job to look, but I assure you, it's nothing untoward. I'm just going to help you look nicer than you already do. Trust me, you'll enjoy the process."

"Um," James mumbles, "can I keep my pants on?"

"Well, at least until you get in the bath, sure," Fabian allows, waving his hand and turning away.

Fabian is a liar. James does not, in fact, enjoy the process. It's very strange having someone present when you bathe, even if they're not watching you (and Fabian doesn't, thankfully). He allows James to put a towel around his waist when he gets out, but that's where the whole process becomes a bit like torture.

There's an unfortunate amount of waxing, hair-plucking, poking, and prodding. At one point, Fabian is chattering away casually as he holds up James' arm and forcefully yanks the hair at his armpit out right from the root. He clicks his tongue every time James yelps, patting his shoulder and speaking in a soothing tone before doing it all over again.

Fabian does do things that James finds himself enjoying, like an entire face massage, which is honestly brilliant. Sadly, there is more to it than that. There's exfoliating, and moisturizing, and more hair-plucking, now at his eyebrows, which makes his eyes water—but curiously, the opposite eye of whichever eyebrow is actually being plucked. James is also uncomfortable because Fabian takes his glasses and makes him put in contacts, then listens calmly as James rants for nearly ten minutes straight about why he should be able to wear his glasses, only to then make James put in the contacts anyway. He ends up having to help, because James doesn't know how, and James gets poked in the eye (thrice) because he keeps flinching, unable to hold still.

But, honestly and truly, James draws the line at his hair. Fabian washes it and does a lovely little

scalp massage that nearly puts James to sleep, but when he sees scissors out of the corner of his eye, he's fully awake. James has never come out of a chair so fast in his life.

"No," James states firmly, pointing at Fabian, who looks baffled. "Absolutely not. If you come anywhere near me with those scissors, I'm going to start practicing for the arena, and the next person getting violently poked in the eye will be *you."*

Fabian's mouth hangs open. "But—but your hair is—"

"I'm perfectly aware of what my hair is, but you're right to say that it's *mine,* Fabian."

"James, please, it's a *wreck."*

"No," James insists firmly.

"Can't I just—"

"No."

"But what if I—"

"No."

"I—" Fabian stares at him, stricken, then heaves a sigh and lowers his hand. He looks really sad, actually, which would make James feel bad if it wasn't his hair. Fabian slowly puts the scissors aside and nods. "Yes, well, fine. I had so many plans for it, you know. Can I at least style it a bit?"

James purses his lips, but the hope in Fabian's eyes is what gets him, really. He relaxes a little. "As long as you don't cut it, or make it lay flat, you can do what you like."

"I...can work with that," Fabian says decisively, squinting as he tilts his head at James and waves him back over to the chair.

Hesitantly, James moves over.

Fabian stays true to his word, and following the styling of James' hair (victoriously not cut, thank you very much), there's being forced into a surprisingly tight suit. It's an odd suit like James has never seen before, very Hallow-esque; a red so dark that it's borderline black with various gold accents. He doesn't know how he feels about it when Fabian plants him in front of the full-length mirror and asks for a review.

Realistically, James knows that he looks good. He can *see* that he looks good. He's always been good-looking, and he's not shy about acknowledging that, but this is… Well, it's *really* enhanced now, that's all. He doesn't look very different, but at the same time, he almost doesn't recognize himself. The suit doesn't look too loud, or overbearing, but it's more stylish and eye-catching than anything he's ever worn. His hair is slightly different, more...full, somehow, and effortless? Alright, James may have to ask Fabian how he did that. But, mostly, it's very strange to see himself without his glasses. It feels like his face is naked, oddly enough. His eyes seem bigger.

"It's...ah…" James clears his throat and glances at Fabian, who is waiting with a bated breath for his response. Helplessly, James gives him a crooked smile. "It's lovely. You did lovely."

Fabian's face absolutely lights up. "Thank you! I'm glad you love it. Come, Gideon should be finished now."

James spares one second to think about what this poor Gideon bloke had to put up with if he was working with Regulus, trying to do all the things that Fabian just did with him, and he has to stifle a laugh as he follows Fabian out. That laughter promptly does in James' throat when he sees Regulus.

Regulus does a visible double-take when he sees him, blinking harshly, but James doesn't have the capacity to wonder about what that means, because he's too busy staring at Regulus. It's just—well, Regulus is always in black, generally, and he's… So, yes, he's undeniably beautiful. There is no denying that, and James has never bothered to try. He knows it, Regulus surely knows it, their entire fucking *district* knows it.

But this is… Well, Regulus has been cleaned up, too. There's a pampered flush to his cheeks, a shine to his hair (which *has* been cut), and a suit on him that matches James' perfectly, except it's a green so dark it's almost black with silver accents. His haircut isn't a drastic change, but whatever Gideon did to it gave him an absolute mass of waves and curls that fall around his face and ears to make him look impossibly sweeter than he always does. Ironic, really, because Regulus hasn't really been *sweet* since before Sirius went into the games.

"Where the fuck are your glasses?" Regulus blurts out, sounding downright *appalled,* borderline horrified.

James immediately feels vindicated by this. He jerks his hands out and yells, "Thank you! I have to wear contacts, Reg. I really don't want to wear them. Do I look very strange?"

"You look—" Regulus falls silent, then clears his throat and narrows his eyes at Fabian. "Give him his glasses back."

"I won't," Fabian says firmly. "I've already compromised on not cutting his hair."

Regulus' eyes bulge. "You were going to *cut his hair?"*

"Thank you!" James bursts out yet again, feeling so supported right now. He gestures frantically at Regulus as he stares at Fabian. "Do you see? He gets it!"

"A stubborn pair, aren't they?" Gideon says wryly, looking at Fabian with his eyebrows raised. It takes James a second to realize that he and Fabian are twins, because for all that their faces are the same with very minor, nearly invisible differences to the eye, their hair styles and clothes are *vastly* different.

"You let them cut your hair," James mumbles, turning his gaze back to Regulus, who scowls.

"I couldn't get out of it. How did you get out of it?"

"Threatened to kill him with the scissors."

"You would...literally never."

"Well, he didn't know that, did he?"

"Now, why didn't I think of that?" Regulus grumbles with a grimace. "Gideon had to strap me to the chair."

"You tried to *bite me,"* Gideon sputters.

"I'll *still* bite you," Regulus warns, glaring at him, and Gideon looks at Fabian as if he's exhausted.

"Fab, I'm beginning to rethink our current career path."

"Gid, I was just thinking the same thing."

James jolts when an alarm goes off, and Fabian immediately claps his hands together. "Right, yes, time to get you two to the carriages. Now, they're pulled by thestrals, so you won't be able to see them unless you've witnessed death in person—not just through a screen, of course. We hear they're very gentle creatures, though, so don't stress about them."

"You'll be meeting with Dorcas sometime very soon. She's the head of the team and the creator of all themes and designs for your outfits," Gideon explains, ushering them along.

"All you have to do is ride the carriage through," Fabian explains. "You may be a bit overwhelmed by the crowds, but it'll be over before you know it. Sirius will be waiting for you by the end, once it's over. Go on, go, stand tall, there you go…"

Again, things feel so fast that James can hardly keep up with them. He and Regulus are led into a tunnel with a lone carriage that seems to be holding itself up. They're both wary to climb into the back and stand, but they don't really have much of a choice. They've barely gotten into place before the carriage jolts, making them both snap their hands out to hold onto the edge of it, trying to remain steady.

The gap of light at the end of the tunnel grows, and with it, the distant sound of muffled screams of delight get louder. James' heart races for reasons he can't explain, and he's tense all over, anticipation—and not the good kind—rising in him until he almost can't breathe. The light starts pouring over them as they're pulled out into the middle of an arena with stands of people screaming and cheering, throwing flowers as fireworks pop and sizzle loudly over their heads.

James immediately feels oversensitized, unsure where to look, having nothing to focus on. His eyes

dart around almost frantically, and he doesn't even have the comfort of his own glasses. His head swivels like it's on a stick, the world a rush of colors and faces jumping out at him until he feels a little sick. He has to squeeze his eyes shut, then just gives up and looks over at Regulus, the only thing that makes sense in all of this.

The thing is, Regulus is nice to look at. As previously mentioned, he's always been beautiful, so this is not really a new thing. The slight changes to his appearance haven't changed much, only highlighting what was already obvious. That's not the only thing James gets out of looking at him, though. It's also just *comforting.* In all this, when he feels like he's lost and shrinking, locking his gaze on Regulus is what comforts him. It genuinely helps him breathe.

"Why are you looking at me?" Regulus asks without even turning his head towards him. His voice is raised slightly, and still, it's hard to hear him over the crowd.

"I'm just—I mean, you look different," James blurts out, because he doesn't think Regulus would appreciate knowing that James draws comfort just from the sight of him. Regulus hates him. James knows that.

"Different," Regulus repeats.

"Good different," James rushes to clarify.

"Did I not look good before the Hallows got ahold of me?"

"What? No, you—that's not what I was saying. I just meant—"

Regulus does look at him, then. "You look different, too."

"Good different?" James asks, blinking at him.

"No," Regulus says, looking away again. His voice is quieter when he speaks next, so much so that James almost misses what he says altogether, which is a soft, "I miss your glasses."

James starts to reply, but he stops when Regulus tilts his face up as their carriage comes to a halt.

He follows his gaze up to the tower that holds people of clear importance. Up there is none other than Riddle, Master of the Hallow. He's the one really behind the games, and if James were to place any blame on anyone for the state of the world, it would be him.

He's an older man, though he wears his age well. His hair is grey with only a light smattering of dark brown threaded through, just the same as his cleanly shaped beard. He's pale, but not in a sickly way. Actually, he's quite handsome—clearly distinguished. He's wearing what can only be expensive robes, the sort that are cut to be tailored to his body, a silver pocket watch chain hanging visibly over his vest from where his robes hang open. Even from here, James can tell he's the type of man that eyes turn to when he enters a room, refined and poise and intimidating. His dark brown eyes sweep over them, critical and sharp, not a scrap of warmth in them.

For a second, he's looking right at Regulus, so intent in studying him that James feels a chill go down his spine. Then, just as easily, Riddle flicks his gaze away, as if he's bored, as if they're meaningless to him, like they're already dead. More so than the Hallows themselves, the people of the Hallow, James despises their Master. *That's* who James takes issue with.

The carriage jolts as they continue on, and James drags his gaze away to go back to looking at Regulus again.

~•~

"Alright, home sweet home," Pandora declares brightly as she pushes open the door and leads them all in.

Sirius remembers his own response to stepping into the accommodations the Hallow provides for the first time. The pure disbelief and helpless wonder, overly aware of how truly *ridiculous* everything is. It's so starkly obvious that no district should be living in poverty or starving with all the blatant frivolities that exist within the Hallow. Sirius, after ten years of being exposed to it, has blown past bitter and settled firmly into exhaustion. Reality is a bitch.

"Now, we each have our own rooms," Pandora continues, turning to walk backwards to keep addressing them. She nearly trips on the steps, so Sirius snaps his hand out to steady her, helplessly fond of her. Sirius isn't fond of many Hallows, but he's been working with her for two years, and she's a good person, *despite* being a Hallow. It's a hard pill to swallow, but some of them genuinely are. "Dinner is within the hour, so you have time to explore your rooms, and your closet, change out of your lovely suits into something more comfortable. Go on, off with you all. We meet back here in forty-five minutes sharp, and do *not* make me drag you out by your ears. I will."

"She will," Sirius confirms.

James and Regulus share a brief look, and then they split off, no doubt needing time to themselves. They've both been quiet since being paraded out in front of the Hallows. Sirius gets it. He remembers what that was like, too.

Sirius also needs some time to acclimate. It's never easy for him, being back within the Hallow, especially as a mentor. It's just a different version of the games; he's less likely to die, admittedly, but that doesn't make it much better.

Inside his own room, Sirius sits down on the edge of his bed and releases a deep breath as his eyes sink shut. It feels like he's shedding a mask he's been wearing as soon as he entered the city, the arena he's been forced into over and over since his victory. Already, he's been running around to meet up with various mentors and known sponsors, trying to get a layout of what's to be expected and what James and Regulus will find themselves at the mercy of, both in competition and support.

Sirius has made a name for himself in the Hallow, he knows that. He's charismatic when he wants to be, and every year, he tries everything he can to see at least one tribute home, which means he's made himself likeable. Despite this, he knows he's too out-spoken at times, too rebellious, doing things that he shouldn't, that could get him into a lot of trouble. Moody, a fellow mentor for a different district, had told him to be more careful. Despite being a paranoid bastard, Sirius took his advice enough to walk a fine line.

He makes himself just loved enough that he can get away with things that most do not, but he's careful not to push too far, not when lives that aren't his are on the line. He presents himself as the dashing young man everyone wants to be, or be with, charming everyone with his grin and grand words, and then he comes to the seclusion of his room and hates himself for it. But what can he do? If he *doesn't,* then he's not trying everything in his power to save at least one of his tributes, and that guilt would kill him.

When they inevitably die, the guilt nearly kills him anyway.

This year, things are already looking bleak. Regulus really doesn't realize the impact of how he presents himself. It's already noticeable, the people that are turning sour just at the mere mention of his name, because of his demeanor. *He doesn't look happy to be here at all,* one sponsor had said, and it took everything in Sirius not to fucking claw his eyes out for it. *Of course he's not happy to be here, you fucking idiot,* Sirius had wanted to scream, and yet, miraculously, he didn't. He'd kept his smile fixed on his face and painted Regulus as the strong, silent type when he's literally anything but. He's genuinely just a brooding, little shit who doesn't like many people, which Sirius has always found secretly endearing.

But here? That's going to get him killed.

It doesn't help that people are already invigorated by pitting Regulus and James against each other. Picking sides. Making them out to be enemies at direct war with each other. People are thriving on it, bloodthirsty from the drama of Sirius' best friend and little brother being on opposite sides, and it's clear who has their favor already.

James. Of course it's James. He stood up and waved. He smiled. He's physically bigger than Regulus—which honestly doesn't mean much, frankly. After all, Sirius killed people three times his size in the arena. Size doesn't fucking *matter,* and people are underestimating Regulus because of it, and because they don't know anything about his skills.

Sirius, of course, has been doing his best to dispel this notion, because it's ideal to get sponsors for *both* tributes, and if they're seen as competing, that will be nigh impossible. It's just not working. No matter what he says, people are so focused on who he thinks will kill the other, on who he *wants* to win, who he's actually rooting for, as if it never even crosses their mind to think that this isn't fun for him, that he's not fucking sickened by the mere thought, as if he's just like them.

Fuck, Sirius doesn't know how he's going to do this.

Sighing, he drags himself up and shuffles to the closet, barely even glancing at what's been provided for him. It's usually the same, and he knows exactly where to look for a soft shirt and loose joggers, something to relax in while he eats dinner. But first, he needs a shower to scrub away how filthy this day has made him feel, so he goes to do exactly that.

By the time he gets out, it's nearly time for dinner, and Pandora really *will* drag him out by his ear if he's late (she has before), so he half-dries his hair, leaving it mostly damp and curling over his shoulder, wetting the collar, and then he leaves. He's not surprised to see that James and Regulus have also gotten showers, despite Fabian and Gideon working on them today. He knows how being paraded in front of the Hallows like pieces of meat feels, and that's filthy, too.

The table is already set, a spread of lavish food in front of them. Regulus and James stare at it like they're not even sure they can touch it, or want to, but Pandora promptly starts filling her plate while humming under her breath. Sirius gives James and Regulus a tiny nod, filling his own plate, and that prompts them to do the same.

Seconds later, someone sweeps out with a trolley of wine bottles to choose from. Sirius looks up as

it stops next to him, and oh no, he doesn't do this. He never stands for it, and Pandora is used to this defiance by now.

"Excuse me, sorry, just—" Sirius raises up out of his seat and reaches out to the man at the trolley, pushing his hand to the back of his head to find the clasp for the mask on his face. His head snaps up in alarm, light brown eyes widening, and Sirius' fingers fumble on the clasp as their eyes meet.

For a beat, Sirius is frozen in place, despite the fact that this is generally a quick affair for him, removing these masks. In this moment, he becomes so starkly aware of how he holds this man's life in his hands. The man must feel the same, because he's equally frozen, so stiff that he looks like stone.

The mask is fitted to his face up to the tip of his nose, made of black, unforgiving metal with three slits above his mouth, just barely showing small peeks of his lips. The way the mask fits to the jaw is purposeful to make sure whoever has them won't let them open their mouth to speak. His eyes are visible, as is the light smattering of freckles just below them, but that's it. A criminal to the Hallow—this is their fate, being muzzled or experimented on, or both, all in the name of the games, finding new things to introduce each year, and then sentenced to a life of servitude in the Hallow.

Sirius—when he learned about it—had hated it. He'd never been sickened by the Hallow so strongly before that moment when he learned that those in the districts that defied the Hallow in some way, or even simply tried to run away, were caught and captured and put through this. The first servant he met with a mask had been when he was sixteen, and he'd begged her to remove it, only for Effie to inform him that if she was caught removing it, or anyone found out she did, then she would be killed. So, he'd taken to removing it *for them.*

The thing is, it's still a risk. They have to put them back on when they leave to return to their cells at night, *but* Sirius has always made it clear that they can go without it when they're in here. Pandora had been startlingly calm when he informed her of this, and she'd promised to never breathe a word of it, even after he threatened to kill her if she did, promising her that it would be his word against hers, and he had made himself important enough that they'd believe him first. She hadn't even batted an eye and just simply agreed.

The way this goes, Sirius has to take the masks off, because they won't do it themselves. If he was very lucky, some of them would get so comfortable that they would come to him first thing so he could remove it for them, but that was as close as he could get to them doing it themselves. He gets why. They'll literally die if they take it off, and this is only really a loophole that no one has dared to test out in the open. None of them, him included, have ever felt the need to take the risk of seeing what would happen if anyone found out that their masks were removed, but *they* didn't remove them.

Usually, Sirius just pulls the mask off before they can do anything. He's learned the hard way that some will panic and fling themselves back, even possibly injure themselves, and he never wants that to happen. He just takes the mask off quickly and explains they don't have to wear it, not in here, that they're safe here, with him.

"It's alright," Sirius murmurs. "You're alright."

That shouldn't work. The man should be leaning away and going back to his job, but he isn't. He just—stays right where he is, staring at Sirius with those wide eyes of his.

"I was going to remove it," Sirius explains, and that gaze sharpens on his face, studying him more intently. "You don't have to wear that here. I don't—we don't require it. When you're here, you're safe. No one will ever know, I promise. I'm not trying to get you killed; I'm just letting you breathe."

Slowly, the man leans away, and for the first time since Sirius was a tribute, he fails to take the mask off the servant assigned to their suite. His hand falls to his side slowly, and he's left disappointed, a lump forming in his throat because it's just—it's *wrong*. It's not fair. No one deserves this, and it's genuinely sickening that they're so conditioned to fear for their lives that they feel they have to live this way.

The wine bottle that the man was holding plonks back on the trolley, and his eyes are still on Sirius when he lifts his hand to the back of his head removes the mask on his own.

Sirius' breath quite literally catches in his throat as the mask slips away from the man's face, revealing the rest. His freckles don't span down the rest of his face, and his mouth is pink and full, but ridiculously chapped. Sirius watches those lips part, and the man releases a soft exhale, his eyelashes fluttering.

"Oh," Sirius breathes out, staring at him, and he can't figure out what to say next. His mind is completely blank.

Pandora, thankfully, knows his routine enough by now to pick it for him by asking, "What's your name?"

Now, in most cases, the servants won't speak even without the mask. Only two out of the eight

years Sirius has been here did, and one of them only spoke when spoken to—Ryanair, his name was—and the other did speak, quite a bit. She practically never shut up, actually, as soon as she realized that she was free to talk—Myrtle was her name, and as many times as Sirius *wanted* to tell her to shut up, he never once did. But, in general, it takes time for them to actually work up to it. No one has ever given their name the first time they were asked.

This man does. "Remus Lupin."

"Are you—are you hungry?" Sirius asks, still just staring at him. He gestures distractedly to the table, never taking his eyes off Remus. "You could just sit the wine on the table and we can pour it for ourselves. Join us. We have plenty."

In all the years Sirius has done this, not one servant would do that, no matter how comfortable they got with him and his tributes. He asked at every meal, and they never agreed.

Remus turns his gaze to the table, then flicks it back to Sirius again. His lips curl up as he says, "I could eat."

Sirius' heart is racing, and he doesn't know why.

Casually, Remus sits the mask down on the table, pulls out a chair, and settles in it. Sirius just keeps standing there, staring at him, oddly dazed, and Regulus has to kick him sharply under the table to get him moving again.

When Sirius pours his wine, he pours *a lot.*

Chapter End Notes

> i saw some of you asking about remus. here he is. not what anyone was expecting, ill bet, but trust the process. there's a reason for all of this, i promise. we do get to see more of him.
>
> also, pandora, fabian, gideon!!! and a dorcas mention! oh and tom riddle, he's here, too. if you're booing him, you're absolutely right to.
>
> im not gonna do a huge in-depth review of each chapter in my own notes (probably, but don't hold me to that), because i want to see your thoughts and theories! already, ive seen some really good ones, and i love getting to read your comments!

also, i know i said i was only going to update on saturdays, BUT im thinking wednesdays and saturdays might be my sweet spot to scratch that itch of feeling accomplished without putting too much pressure on myself. if i need to take a wednesday off or something, i will (saturdays are set in stone), but for now wednesdays and saturdays are when ill be posting. if that changes or i plan to take a break, ill let you know!

thoughts, theories, comments, or concerns? let me know! ill see you all on wednesday <3

Training Day One

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to children dying in the arena (nothing explicit, just mentioned)
-references to past substance abuse, and recovery from it
-a brief, blink-and-you-miss-it reference to suicide through substance abuse (about Alpard)
-vague reference to torture (not explicit with zero details and likely subtle enough that you won't pick up on it, but still, just in case)
-mentions of murder (forced murder, due to the arena)
-references to blatant mistreatment to servants
-brief reference to someone being objectified, even as a minor (kind of like a watered down version of finnick without the forced prostitution (if you've read the books), because i simply do not have it in my heart to do that, but the sentiment behind it is still terrible and not unlike the sexualization that many young actors have had to face, i.e. millie bobby brown, finn wolfhard, etc etc, as examples. i don't dive into it much, it's just mentioned in passing, because it makes me uncomfortable and i hate it)

and im pretty sure that's it. the warnings make it seem really bad, but this is actually a fairly cute chapter. enjoy that while it lasts. we've got some fun tension, as well as adorable, awkward bumbling, and a suprise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Now, remember," Sirius says as he leads them towards the training center, "the next three days are really important. Not only are you going to be showing the others what you're capable of, you're also going to be seeing what *they're* capable of. If you listen to nothing else I tell you, listen to this." He turns and comes to a halt, swiveling to face them, eyes oddly intense. "Regulus, stay away from the daggers."

"What?" Regulus sputters, mouth falling open. He feels absolutely betrayed instantly. "But that's __"

"Listen to me, you utter twat," Sirius cuts in harshly. "You don't understand, there *will* be eyes on you, and I expect your eyes to be on the others as well. The problem is, you're my little brother, and you're from a family of Victors. That makes you a threat, and you *can't* let them know that you actually are, do you understand? They'll want to get you out of the way early if they think you'll be a problem."

"Wait, you're good with daggers?" James mumbles, glancing over at him with his eyebrows raised.

Regulus purses his lips and pointedly looks away, which makes Sirius snort. Yes, so Regulus is good with daggers. Sirius made *sure* he was good with daggers, and even after Sirius stopped having him practice with them, Regulus continued on his own.

It was partially just a game as children, at first. Shamefully, they used to leave school and sneak out of the district to go play-fight with sticks, like they were in the arena before they ever were, back before they could fully grasp why it was something to be genuinely afraid of, back before their names were ever in the reaping and it became a possibility—and now, a reality. As they got older, though, the tone changed to the point that it became unspoken preparation *just in case,* which is coming in handy now, at least.

Sirius used to make daggers for Regulus out of stone. He would work for months to chip them and shape them, then give them handles. Sometimes, he would find broken glass or discarded metal and find ways to turn them into daggers, too. Sirius stopped making them when he came out of the arena, so Regulus had to learn how. He did, but never as good as Sirius.

But yes, Regulus is good with them. *Very* good with them, actually, above all else. The fact that Sirius is asking him to make himself look weak is—annoying. It goes against every single one of Regulus' instincts, but he'll do it. He will, because Sirius is asking him to.

"You, James," Sirius says, focusing on him, "you're not going to do any showing off either."

"And what are *you* good at?" Regulus asks, turning to arch an eyebrow at him.

James chuckles. "That's a long list."

"I'm listening," Regulus says dryly.

"Well, I'm good with my hands," James starts, a smile twitching at the corners of his lips. *"Really* good, in fact."

Sirius snorts again. "James is strong, but he has precisely zero skills with a weapon of any kind, which is a huge oversight on mine and Effie's part, I'm now realizing. So, James, you're to do some *light* practicing with any weapon you come across. Long range is preferable, or anything

interchangeable, but you'd be surprised how much of the arena is hand-to-hand. Brute strength can get you far, but it doesn't mean you can't be killed. So, try things, get a feel for what works, but *do not* make a spectacle of yourself. If you turn out to be a god with a sword, then you make sure you drop it a few times so you look like a fucking idiot, do you understand?"

"Shouldn't be too hard for him," Regulus mutters.

James ducks his head forward, shoulders shaking with laughter. Sirius looks exasperated, and Regulus resists the urge to heave a sigh. Insulting James has never worked. He always thinks it's so fucking funny.

"Right," James chokes out. "Got it, Sirius. Understood."

"Focus mainly on swords, axes, and maces. Sadly, you're not going to be able to learn to use a bow or crossbow in just three days," Sirius tells him, then flicks his finger between them both. "You two need to train hand-to-hand together. Do *not* train with anyone else. Don't let them know the weight of your body, or any of your tells, if you have any. They'll unfortunately be able to watch, but you'll also be able to watch them. Pay attention. I *mean* that."

"Wait, why does James get to know the weight of my body?" Regulus protests. "He's *also* the competition."

Sirius glances at James, who holds his gaze for a second before looking down at his hands. Sirius' face twitches, lips pressing into a thin line, and then he looks at Regulus. "He's less of a problem than everyone else, trust me. This is—I know you don't like it, but you'll need allies in the arena, Reggie."

"You're asking me to trust people who are going to be trying to kill me at some point?"

"I'm asking you to trust James. Everyone else? No. Just find the ones you'll trust enough not to hunt you down and try to play nice, yes? You don't want to make enemies; you want to make reluctant allies, in that they'll look the other way if you happen to run past them, rather than chase you."

"I—" Regulus exhales sharply, then grumbles, *"Fine."*

For a moment, Sirius looks at him more fondly than he has in years, and then that expression fades

into worry.

"So, I do get to know the weight of your body?" James speaks up, a tiny quirk to the corner of his mouth that makes Regulus want to hit him.

"I'm literally going to kill you," Regulus informs him flatly.

James' smile grows wider. "Well, you know, if you're on top, that might not be the worst way to go."

"Are you—flirting with my brother?" Sirius asks, baffled, and then he reaches out and swats James over the head. "Stop that. Don't do that."

"Sorry," James mumbles, reaching up to rub the back of his head, coughing. "Just—nerves, you know."

Sirius' face softens, and he looks at Regulus, completely missing the way James raises his head and waggles his eyebrows at Regulus with a wink. Regulus doesn't want to laugh. He refuses to laugh. He fights so hard not to laugh, only just succeeding, but losing the battle against the smile that tugs at his lips. Seeing it, James looks away with a grin.

Utterly oblivious, Sirius continues. "Today, I don't want either of you doing too much of anything. Regulus, you focus on all things environmental. You're good at remembering things, so learn the plants that will kill you, and the ones that won't. Learn what to do if you're too cold, or too hot. Learn how to tie a knot and start a fire and find water. Learn as much as you can as if your life depends on it, because it does."

"Is there any way of knowing what conditions we'll be in when we get to the arena *before* we get there?"

"No. The gamemakers will be building the arena around all the tributes, what skills you have and also those that you don't. They want a good show, not something too hard that you all die too quickly, but still a challenge. Now, when the evaluation comes up at the end of these three training days, *that's* when you'll show off your dagger skills, so they know to put them in there for you. Still, you need to be prepared for anything."

"Er, what will I be doing?" James asks, waving a hand.

"Try out a few weapons, but learn the same things Regulus is learning as well," Sirius tells him. "Both of you need to be observant. Watch the others. Pay attention to the allies that form, and find the death eaters."

James blinks. "The what?"

"Death eaters," Sirius repeats. "Every year, the strongest, most skilled tributes will gravitate towards each other and form something of an alliance. They're known as death eaters because—well, the name implies why. They're usually the ones doing the hunting of the others, and I've seen it happen enough times to know that they will pick everyone else off until the end, then turn on each other. You do *not* want to be their target, because they're ruthless, and they will stop at nothing to find you and kill you."

"Charming," Regulus says under his breath.

"And when we find them...what?" James asks.

"Stay off their radar," Sirius replies simply, "but take note of what they're capable of. That goes for everyone, really. Learning their strengths and weaknesses is ideal, but do your best not to reveal your own. Don't provoke the death eaters, avoid them at all costs, and—and be smart. *Look* stupid, but *be* smart. Alright? Say alright."

"Alright," James says immediately, and then he joins Sirius in staring at Regulus expectantly.

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Alright."

So, with that, James and Regulus are set loose in the training room, which is, quite frankly, more intimidating than Regulus was expecting it to be. There are countless mats all over the floor; racks of weapons all throughout the room; different ranges for various bows, axe-throwing, and dagger-throwing; a section for rope climbing; and different places to go to learn about survival skills, bugs, plants, and possible environments they may be subjected to. But that's not the most intimidating part, if Regulus is honest.

It's strange stepping into a room and becoming very intensely aware that these people are going to

try to kill him, or he's going to kill some of them. He can feel the shock of it settle into his body as he sees heads swivel towards him and James.

Including him and James, there are twenty-four tributes altogether. That's twenty-two to two—or, more accurately, twenty-three to one. Regulus takes them all in slowly with James right next to him, uncomfortably aware that they're being studied in return. Regulus doesn't even know any of their names. At least six of them are young teenagers, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen.

It puts a knot of discomfort in Regulus' stomach to see them, to think that any of them—any at all—might end up dead by his hand. He doesn't… Unlike some, he's not going into the arena with the desire to kill. Some tributes actually do; they look forward to it. Regulus doesn't, and he has no plans to kill anyone unless he has no other choice.

When Sirius was in the arena, he never killed anyone who wasn't trying to kill him. He even once helped a girl escape a trap. Regulus remembers watching him cry when her name and picture played in a banner in the sky, signaling that she'd died. No, Sirius never killed just to kill; he killed when the only other option was to *be* killed. You'd think that would be mean he didn't kill very much, and yet, he killed twelve people.

Regulus knows, because he counted as he watched.

Twelve people. Literally half of his competition. It makes Regulus wonder how he handled his three days of training, and how he knows that coming from a family of Victors makes things harder for them. Thinking back, Regulus recalls that Sirius was a target. Regulus thinks he knows why now.

With a brief look exchanged between him and James, they split off and go their separate ways. For the first time, Regulus really understands what Sirius meant about the games already being started. He understands all too well.

It doesn't take long for Regulus to locate the death eaters. They're not even shy about it, clustering together and using weapons like toys. It's all loud laughter and dirty looks with them. There's two older men and one woman, clearly around Regulus' age, and one boy who's much younger, looking to be around fourteen or fifteen. Regulus does his best not to look at them, even though he can feel *them* looking at *him.*

In between what he's doing, he scans the room, mentally filing away anything of importance. There are two other people who are essentially doing the same thing as him, learning all they can about survival, so he can't really pick up anything from them. There's one teenager absolutely

demolishing a training dummy by repeatedly beating it with a club; there's no finesse to it, so Regulus assumes she's just an angry girl.

At one point, Regulus sees James talking to someone while tossing a hatchet from one hand to the other. The guy has kind eyes and round cheeks, and he's laughing at something James is saying to him. Regulus looks away.

After a bit, Regulus has got it down. He's memorized faces, if nothing else, and he has a mental list of who can do what just based on what he's seen so far.

It's at the fire-starter station that James finds him again.

"You look focused," James whispers as he crouches down next to him and watches as Regulus spins a stick back and forth.

"Yes, well, this does take focus."

"It doesn't look like it's working."

"It also takes time and patience, James."

"You sound frustrated."

Regulus grits his teeth. "What do you want? Are you over here to learn to start a fire, or just to pester me?"

"Can't I do both?" James asks lightly, shuffling to settle next to him with the tools the station provides, which isn't very much. Just things you'd find out in the wild. There's an instructional video and a book with clear steps, as well as pictures, which he pays attention to enough to actually shut up for a while. He does eventually speak again, though. "So, take a guess as to who the death eaters are."

"I saw them."

"They have a child with them. I can't work out why, and I don't like it."

"Sirius will likely know," Regulus murmurs, his own lips tipping down. He also doesn't like it.

James hums. "They talked to me, you know. The death eaters."

"Really?"

"Yes. Tried to recruit me, since they're under the impression that I want you dead. *They* want you dead, because they're assuming you're a threat, so Sirius was right."

"Lovely," Regulus says flatly. "And?"

"And what?"

"What did you tell them?"

"Oh, I told them all to fuck off. Well, not the child; he's very quiet, as far as I can tell," James muses.

Regulus' hands halt on the stick as his head snaps up. "You *what?* James, Sirius said—oh, he's going to kill you. We're not supposed to be provoking them, you idiot."

"Well, I was polite. Mostly," James grumbles. "What was I supposed to do, Regulus? *Join them?* I'm not—I won't do that. I won't even *pretend* to do that."

"You've just put a target on your own back, you do realize?"

"Shouldn't you be relieved by such a thing? Better chances of survival for you, isn't it?"

"James," Regulus hisses, glaring at him.

Heaving a sigh, James lifts his head to stare at him, his own hands going still on his stick. "Staying off their radar is hard to do when we're already on it to begin with, yeah? They wanted to know where I stood, and they weren't going to let me avoid it, so I just… Well, I made it clear. There's no world in which I would sink low enough to align myself with people like them. They're already talking about all the killing they're going to do, Regulus, and I—I don't—I can't—"

"Alright," Regulus cuts in. "Alright, James." It's the most that Regulus has seen James lose his composure during all of this, and that's not something Regulus can stand. He looks back down at his stick and starts over. "Did you at least find a weapon that you were comfortable enough with?"

"Well, you know, I used to chop wood for the fireplace in our house, something I did so Mum and Dad didn't have to," James explains, sounding steadier again. "It turns out, doing that a lot over the years gets you comfortable with hatchets. I never really thought of them as weapons, but…I don't feel like I have no idea what I'm doing with them, so there's that."

"They're not very clean," Regulus murmurs. "I mean, killing someone with that will be brutal, James."

"Killing someone with anything is brutal, Regulus. With these, they're also long range, if you throw them."

"There's an art to throwing weapons. You can't just toss them about as you like. Well, you can, but without practice, the chances of it actually landing are very low."

"And you would know?" James asks.

Regulus huffs a weak laugh. "I'd know better than you."

"That's true, I'll give you that," James admits. "I've spoken to a few people. Have you?"

"No," Regulus says.

James sighs. "Well, it's only day one."

"So it is," Regulus agrees. "Find anyone you like enough to trust yet?"

"You," James says.

Regulus nearly falters again, but he's in no mood to start over. That one word and the tone in which James said it makes him start to rub the stick faster, and world of wonders, smoke begins to rise up. He draws the stick away and leans over, carefully blowing on the spark to get it to catch, pulling away as the fire starts to build.

"Shit, how did you do that?" James blurts out, and Regulus looks over to see him gaping at his fire.

"Well, for one thing, you're holding it all wrong," Regulus mutters, reaching out to cover James' hands and situate them properly. "You want to rotate in a downward motion, so you're creating friction that will catch. Try it now." James does not try, his hands still. "James? Just roll downward and—"

Regulus looks up and stops talking, because James isn't even paying attention. He's just looking at him, scanning his face where they're leaning close together. Regulus' fingers twitch against James' hands, and he means to pull away, but he finds it impossible to move when James is staring at him so intently.

"I do trust you, you know," James whispers.

"You shouldn't," Regulus whispers back. "I said I wouldn't hesitate, and I meant it."

"I'll believe that when you prove it."

"Are you asking me to kill you?"

"Daring you," James corrects, holding his gaze, looking at him like he knows Regulus won't, and that's what makes him so dangerous, because Regulus is afraid he's right.

Regulus jerks his hands back like he's been burned, and he shoves to his feet to march away, drawing too much attention. But it's James' gaze on him he feels when he goes.

~•~

Sirius watches Marlene raise her hand for another drink, slumped over the bar. She's looking rough, but much better than last year, and the one before it.

Four years ago, she won her games, and she's been a mentor ever since, so she's on year three now. Sirius has sort of taken her under his wing, giving her as much help as he can. He remembers her games; he remembers that she killed one of his tributes; he remembers thinking that she would be one of the first to die, then being surprised when she was the last one standing.

This year, both of Marlene's tributes are under sixteen. One is fourteen, and the other is fifteen, younger than both Sirius and Marlene when they entered their own games.

"They're going to die," Marlene murmurs, staring down into the glass that's pushed her way. "They're so—Sirius, they're so young, and they're terrified, and I don't—"

"Marlene," Sirius says gently, and she falls silent.

There's an odd understanding between mentors. Or, most of them. There are exceptions, usually the ones that are mentors of the death eaters; they generally thrive on the games as much as their tributes, and the Hallows. Among those are Lucius Malfoy, Antonin Dolohov, and Corban Yaxley.

Despite the fact that their tributes will all be competing, most mentors spend enough time together to become friends. They're all in the same boat, really, and there's nothing like a bond formed between those that understand the same thing, especially when no one else truly can. They know that their tributes will all be slaughtering one another very soon, but that's not something they can escape, or avoid, so they have to coexist with that reality. Most of them do. Among those are Sirius himself, Marlene McKinnon, Frank Longbottom, and Emmeline Vance.

Early on, getting attached to tributes is commonplace. You grow to care for them, get to know them, and try so fucking hard to save them—and most of the time, you don't manage to. At most, you can only save one, and the chance of that is literally eight percent. Sirius has done the math. He knows.

So, watching your tributes die is never easy, especially when you've come to care for them. You have so much hope for that eight percent, but the reality is, you likely won't get it. Sirius has never gotten it. Neither has Marlene, in the two years prior that she's been a mentor. There are twelve mentors, and only one of them can bring home one Victor; the chances of that being you is also eight percent. That's what they don't tell you. The odds are never in your favor.

Sirius has learned the hard way to not get attached, to do everything he can for his tributes, but face the brutal truth that they'll likely die. It doesn't make it sting less when they do, but it's the only way he can cope with it. Marlene is still struggling to learn to cope with it. Sirius knows how hard it is.

"And the worst part is that everyone knows it," Marlene says, finally, unable to let it go. "They all know that they're not going to make it, so I have sponsors already brushing me off, and it doesn't help that my design team is complete shit. I have nothing—absolutely *nothing*— to work with, Sirius."

Wincing, Sirius reaches out and pushes her glass up from the bottom, encouraging her to drink. It's probably not the best thing for coping, especially with how easily it becomes a crutch, but sometimes—well, sometimes, there's no other way to cope other than dulling the senses. Sirius was very bad about it when he first returned from his games, before James repeatedly dried him out, before he learned moderation. Not that James really gave him much of a choice.

He was never harsh about it. That was the worst part. He never complained, or got upset, or begged him to do better and try harder. He just took care of him without question, every single time. He didn't blame Sirius when he turned right around and did it again and again; he just picked him up, cleaned him up, and helped. It was James who kept him from choking on his own vomit; it was James who swept through his room and removed every drink and drug he had; it was James who bathed him when he couldn't bathe himself, dressed him when he was shaking too hard to do so, and believed in him every time he got better, even when Sirius had gotten worse all over again so many times before. It was James who kept him from killing himself just like his uncle Alphard.

So, through James' quiet, steady determination to take care of him, Sirius picked himself back up and did better, because he loves James enough that he wouldn't keep putting all of that on him. He knew—they both knew—that James would take care of him like that for the rest of their lives and still smile at him each day, and Sirius couldn't do that to him. He refused.

"Marlene, you're doing everything you can," Sirius tells her quietly, his lips tipping down.

"Am I?" Merlene croaks, squeezing her eyes shut as she presses her glass to her forehead.

Sirius sighs. "You are. Listen to me, you *are*. I know you, and that act you put on with the sponsors; that's not you. Who are you doing that for, if not them?"

"It's not working," Marlene whispers.

"You're doing your best."

"That's not enough."

"It has to be." Sirius reaches out and plucks the glass from her hand, waiting for her to meet his eyes. "It *has* to be, because that's all you can do. That's all you can do, Marlene."

Marlene shudders out a deep breath, looking away. "If I could go in and die for them, I would."

"I know," Sirius says softly, because he does know. He knows that even more intimately now, considering who his tributes are this year. Every cell in his body *craves* to take either of their places and die so that they don't have to.

"What about you?" Marlene mutters, glancing over at him again. "You have it rough this year. Your brother, your best friend, *and* a new design team. How's that going, then?"

Sirius hesitates. Marlene is a friend, and he trusts her more than any other mentor, but it's still not wise to reveal too much information. He won't take that risk, not with Regulus and James on the line. So, he opts for discussing the safest option, the one that Marlene has granted him. "So far, the new design team seems really quite good. Much better than the years before. The lead is Dorcas. I haven't spoken much to her, but she's gotten James and Regulus' measurements from Gideon and Fabian already, and she's working on something, so that's promising. She'll be meeting them tomorrow."

"Dorcas… Dorcas… Dorcas Meadowes?" Marlene asks, her eyebrows shooting up.

"Yes, I think so. Why? Do you know her?"

"Not personally, but… Well, she's made a name for herself as a stylist. She makes statements with her work, enough that some of the more pretentious people have sworn her off."

"Oh, I like her already," Sirius says, then pauses. "Probably."

"For a Hallow, she's…" Marlene clears her throat. "Well, you know, most of them look ridiculous. She...doesn't."

"Is that so, McKinnon?" Sirius asks, arching an eyebrow at her, and she purses her lips and averts her eyes.

Sirius would be the last person to judge her for having something with a Hallow, despite the fact that he's never done it, though no one actually knows that. Rumors drift through the Hallow, and the ones surrounding him have a lot to do with all the apparent sexual relations he's having with everyone. It's been like this since he won his games, even at sixteen years old, because he flirts and charms and teases, and he never outright denies or confirms any insinuation that people make. That's what they like—the mystery, and the little hope they have in the back of their heads that, someday, they'll get their turn with him if they do or say the right thing. He's had many propositions and bribes, but he's a master at sidestepping them and still maintaining his reputation.

Everyone thinks he's had many lovers, especially those that are Hallows, but the last thing Sirius did was kiss Mary when he was sixteen, just a few days before the reaping that ended with him volunteering for his brother. They weren't even dating. They didn't even go any farther than that, and that was as far as he'd ever gone. Becoming a sex symbol for the Hallows had left a bitter taste in his mouth, because he knows people only want him just to say that they had him, not for *him.*

"Oh, look at the time," Marlene mumbles, shooting up out of her chair. She darts her gaze to the clock on the wall. "I think training should be over now. I need to go meet with my tributes, and you should do the same."

"Mhm," Sirius hums, lips twitching, but he dutifully gets up nonetheless, because she's not wrong.

When Sirius makes it back to the suite, James and Regulus are indeed back, and they're both being lectured by Pandora. Sirius doesn't really know for what, but they seem sullen, and they *both* perk up and look relieved when he comes in.

"Whatever they did, they didn't," Sirius announces, putting a soothing hand on Pandora's shoulder,

and she shoots him a cross look before plopping down in her chair with a huff. Sirius settles down across from Regulus and James, elbows on his knees as he leans forward. "So, what did we learn?"

"James is fucking *stupid,"* Regulus blurts out immediately, and James tosses his hands up. "He told the death eaters to go fuck themselves, Sirius."

"You—" Sirius darts his gaze to James, who shrinks down a little bit and drops his eyes. Sirius reaches up and pinches the bridge of his nose, eyes shut tight, a headache already forming as he whispers, "Of course you did. The very thing I told you *not* to do, of course you did it."

"I'm *sorry,"* James whines, distressed. "They tried to recruit me, Sirius! What was I supposed to do? I—I said it...nicely?"

Sirius drops his hand and sighs. "You told them *nicely* to go fuck themselves?"

"I was very polite," James mumbles.

"That doesn't—" Sirius inhales deeply, then slowly exhales, forcing himself to relax. "Alright, let's just… So, they tried to recruit you? Why? Did you do *anything?"*

James shakes his head quickly. "No, I swear I didn't. I barely even picked up a few weapons before they came over to me. Er, the main leader seems to be Mulciber, but it's also Avery, Bernice, and a younger boy named Hodge. He's—he's really young, Sirius. Tiny, really."

"Yes, that's normal for the death eaters. They take on one or two people who aren't actually all that strong. Disposable people. The weakest links that they kill first if they all reach the end. I'm assuming they wanted you to be the second?"

"I—well, I don't know. I don't *think* so. They—they wanted me because they thought I would want to help them kill Regulus."

"Ah," Sirius says softly, working to keep his expression neutral as his heart *plummets.* He'd hoped —oh how he'd hoped that Regulus wouldn't be a target just for his name. He'd hoped that there would be some chance that Regulus would escape that unscathed, because Sirius hadn't managed to.

"I didn't really have a choice other than to accept or refuse. I was put on the spot, Sirius. What should I have done? *Joined* them?" James asks, his eyes wide.

Sirius sighs. "I should have anticipated that. You and Regulus are being pitted against each other, which is less than ideal. It's like—sides. Team James versus Team Regulus. No, I would never say join the death eaters, because they're fucking awful, but this is...not good. *Very* not good. Not only is Regulus a target, but so are you now, James."

"So much for staying off their radar," Regulus mutters.

"Do *not* provoke them any further, either of you," Sirius insists, glancing between them almost desperately.

"It's too late, isn't it?" James murmurs.

"Yes," Sirius confirms, dread in his veins. "They'll be coming for both of you now, so the plan has changed. Regulus, when you go in tomorrow, you go right for the daggers. James, did you find anything you were comfortable with?"

"Ah, hatchets?" James says awkwardly.

"Practice with them," Sirius tells him. "And you two—you stay *together.* Remain within a few steps of one another at all times. Put up a united front and make sure they know that you're not going to be *easy* targets. Some people are more soft around the middle than they seem, and if you can intimidate them, you can make them think twice about targeting you first. Don't train hand-to-hand tomorrow; you'll do that on your last day. Tomorrow is about showing everyone that you *are* a threat."

"Confidence is key," Pandora says. "I've watched even the strongest and most self-assured tributes falter because another one was more certain they'd win than them. The games are more than just physical; they're mind games, too."

Regulus raises his eyebrows. "So, you *do* want us to provoke them?"

"No," Sirius counters. "I want you to intimidate them from afar. We want them wary, not angry. Continue to avoid them, and never approach them directly. You, James, I'm assuming you at least talked to other tributes, if Regulus didn't."

"Yeah, a few," James admits. "There was one man I really liked. Peter Pettigrew. He's gentle. Harmless, really. Squeamish, too, he said. He's pretty sure he's going to die very quickly, and he's terrified."

"And what can he do?" Sirius asks.

James blinks, opening his mouth, then closing it. "Er, well, I don't know. I saw him with a knife a few times, but he didn't look like he knew what to do with it."

"Anyone else?" Sirius tries, his voice strained.

"There's Vanity," James says weakly. "She's brilliant with bugs. Knew them all just by picture. She's, er, fifteen."

Sirius' eyes flutter shut. "Who else?"

"I got on well with Irene, Dylan, and Mathias."

"And what could they do?"

"Mathias is good with the crossbow. I watched them. They hit the target nine times."

"How many times did they shoot?"

"...Twenty-seven."

"Twenty-seven."

James heaves a sigh as Sirius' eyes open. "What do you want me to say, Sirius? They're the ones I got on with, alright?"

The ones who are going to die, Sirius thinks, but he won't say it. It sits like a lump in his throat anyway, and he flicks his gaze away to land on Regulus. "And you? Anyone at all?"

"There was one," Regulus says, and James looks startled by this. Sirius is also surprised. "I didn't actually speak to him, but I watched him. He mostly stayed alone, not even spending time with the other person from his district. Just—he's smart, and he can climb. He spent a lot of time at the hanging-ropes, and he ties knots quicker than I've ever seen."

"Oh, I know who you're talking about," James blurts out, his eyes wide. "Evan Rosier. I talked to him for about a minute or two. He showed me how to tie a knot out of vines. He was quiet, though, and he mostly seemed to want to be left alone."

"He goes unnoticed," Regulus adds.

"There's potential there," Sirius mutters. "See if anything comes of it, I suppose, but don't force it. You don't want to agitate him enough that he builds you a noose."

"Thank you for that lovely mental imagery, Sirius," Regulus says with a grimace, reaching up to lightly touch his throat.

"You look tired," James comments, eyebrows furrowed, because trust James to worry about him, even now.

"I'm fine," Sirius lies, smiling tightly. "I just need a shower."

Pandora reaches out to nudge his knee. "Go on, go have a shower. I'll tend to them for a bit. Dinner won't be for a few hours yet, so we have time to rest."

"Yeah, alright," Sirius mumbles, because the Hallow always makes him feel dirty, and he can never feel clean.

"Do you need towels?" Pandora asks.

"I do, yeah, thanks," Sirius says as he shuffles away, trusting her to handle it. She's one of the few Hallows he actually trusts at all. No one knows how much work she puts in, honestly.

In his room, Sirius putters around, grabbing the clothes he'll change into, still in the ones he wore to charm sponsors today. It's like putting on a uniform, and Sirius always misses his clothes back home when he's here. Everything here is just cashmere and silk and satin, things that objectively feel and look good, but it's not his patchy, beat-up leather jacket that he's worn for years. Perhaps it was ridiculous, but when he'd made it home after his games, he'd curled around that jacket and cried into it like a child. He was so scared it wouldn't fit him anymore, like he was a different person in an entirely different body, and yet it did. To this day, it still fits.

There's a knock on his door, and when he answers it, Remus is standing on the other side with a stack of white, fluffy towels. Sirius sucks in a sharp breath, blinking rapidly.

Stupidly, the first thing he blurts out is, "You're not wearing the mask."

"I was under the impression I didn't have to here," Remus replies. "Oh, and hello. I've brought your requested towels."

"You don't. I mean, hello. Hi. No, ah, you don't have to wear it, of course not," Sirius says in a rush. "I just—well, most people don't take them off. I usually have to take them off for them."

"Doesn't make much of a difference who removes it, does it? Either way, if I'm caught or found out, I'll be killed, or worse," Remus murmurs, lifting a shoulder in a half-shrug.

"We won't tell anyone, and no one will catch you here," Sirius assures him. He pauses. "Worse… Worse than dying."

"There are worse things," Remus tells him. "I know. I've experienced them."

"Me too," Sirius admits quietly, startled into honesty.

Remus looks at him for a long moment, then he nods. "Right, well, I have your towels."

"Oh! Oh, yeah, um…" Sirius clears throat and steps back. "You can come in. I'm just—I'm getting ready for a shower."

"Would you like me to hang them outside the shower for you?"

"Oh, no, no you don't have to do that. You can just sit them on the bed. Thank you."

"You're welcome," Remus says as he moves into the room to sit the towels down on the bed.

Sirius goes back into his closet, despite the fact that he's already picked his clothes. He's sort of just hiding. In his closet. Coughing, he raises his voice to ask, "So, would it be too terribly cliche of me to ask what your crime was, Remus?"

"What happens if I don't want to answer?" Remus replies.

"Well...don't?" Sirius frowns at the selection of dresses in front of him. There are so many *sequins.* "If you don't want to, you don't have to. That goes for anything, really, at least with me."

There's a long beat, then, "I don't want to answer."

"Alright," Sirius agrees promptly.

"Do you need anything else, Mr. Black?"

"Oh, don't—you don't have to call me that. Just Sirius is fine."

"Do you need anything else, Just Sirius?" Remus asks, a vague note of amusement in his voice.

Sirius briefly drops his face into his hands, then repeatedly taps the heel of his hand against his

forehead. Taking a deep breath, he lifts his head and turns to step out of the closet, utterly empty-handed. "Sirius. I meant, call me Sirius."

"Sirius," Remus says softly, his lips curled up at the corners. He holds Sirius' gaze as he nods. "Do you need anything else, Sirius? Anything at all?"

"Do you?" Sirius blurts out.

Remus blinks. "Sorry?"

"Just—I mean, is there anything you need?" Sirius asks, feeling dangerously close to fidgeting. "Are you hungry? You can join us for supper again, if you like."

"Well, sure, but first I have to cook it," Remus tells him.

Sirius pauses, then murmurs, "You're using our kitchen to do it, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Do you need help?"

"I don't."

"Do you...want help?"

Remus stares at him for a long moment once again, and his lips twitch up further. His eyes do this thing where they soften at the corners, and it's making Sirius' stomach flip over like it's tumbling down a hill. "If you'd like."

"Would *you* like?" Sirius checks.

"I would like your company," Remus clarifies.

Sirius is not at all prepared for the effect those words have on his body. He's pretty sure he's flushing from head-to-toe, and he reaches up to swipe his hand over his mouth to hide his growing grin as he looks away. "Yeah, alright. When do you plan to start, then?"

"In an hour. You have enough time for a shower."

"Brilliant. I'll—be there."

"Alright, Sirius," Remus says with a huff of laughter. "Am I excused?"

"What?" Sirius blinks, then jolts. "Oh! Oh, yeah, of course. You don't have to ask. You can just come and go as you like and leave whenever you're ready. Or not leave. I mean, if you—just if you're not...ready. Um."

"Alright," Remus repeats, then gives him a lingering look before turning around and walking away without another word, a quiet chuckle escaping him as he goes.

Sirius' face *burns,* and he grabs the towels to muffle a groan into them as he heads to the shower. On the way, he bumps directly into a wall, because of course he does.

~•~

The thing about being a servant of the Hallows is that you get very used to going unseen, so much so that you're hyper aware of being noticed, to the point that you can *feel* eyes on you.

Remus can feel eyes on him now, in the kitchen, as he chops vegetables in the machine provided. He's slightly turned away from the door, so he can't see who's watching him, but he doesn't need three guesses to work out who it is.

Remus has never been seen before in the Hallow, until Sirius.

For a while, Remus doesn't lift his head, wondering how long Sirius is going to keep looking at him without announcing himself. No one's ever done that before; just observed him, like there's something worth looking at. Not here, in the Hallow. Here, he's just a shadow passing through a room, completely ignored, less impactful than the fucking furniture.

Sirius had, in so many words, changed his life in a split second. For that moment when he was reaching up to remove the mask on Remus' face, Remus quite literally saw his life flash before his eyes—and it wasn't exactly a life he was proud of, at least not since he was brought to the Hallow. And what did he have to look forward to? More of the same? So, in that split second, Remus had almost welcomed it.

But that's not what it turned out to be at all. Instead, it was and is something much more peculiar than Remus could have ever prepared himself for.

People, as a rule, do *not* care about the servants. They just—don't. It doesn't matter if they're Hallows, or tributes, or mentors; there's no *point* in caring about the servants, because there's nothing to be done for them. Their fate is sealed, until death, and there's no way to help them. So, people don't try, and they don't care.

Remus can't blame them, really. That's easier, isn't it? They're all servants to the Hallow, in a way; he's just more obvious about it. Not that he has much of a choice, but alas.

Sirius cares. He cares enough to notice them, enough to give them the space and freedom to fucking *breathe* properly, to speak to them and treat them like they're actual human beings. He cares enough to repeatedly undermine the clear position he has over them, willing to let Remus address him by his name, offering choices and free will. He cares enough that he's made it the standard in his presence, to the point that everyone around him follows it, and accepts it.

And, look, Remus has heard about Sirius Black. Of course he has. The servants know everything about *everything,* because they may be silent, but they still listen. Remus has heard it all; he's just not the type of person to believe a damn thing about someone before he meets them. The only impression he trusts is his own, and Sirius—well, he's made *quite* the impression.

Remus pulls out the tray of chopped vegetables, gently sliding them into the pan. Everything in the kitchen is geared towards safety, so Remus has no access to anything sharp or hot, a failsafe in case he gets any ideas. Even the pans on the stove lock in place and self-stir, meaning he can't actually pick anything up. It does provide a mostly hands-free cooking experience, at least, so there's that.

Sirius is still there, and Remus can't take it anymore, so he glances over to find that Sirius is

watching him like every move he makes is fascinating. He's lost in doing that for a beat, and then he jolts when he seems to realize that he's caught. He straightens up and coughs.

"Hi, sorry, I was just—" Sirius makes a vague gesture with his hand in Remus' direction. "I've never seen that used, so…"

"It's fairly simple. Do you want to try?" Remus asks, motioning towards it with an onion not yet chopped.

"Oh. Sure," Sirius says, shuffling further into the kitchen. He hesitates when he gets closer to Remus, like he isn't sure he's allowed in his space. He even gestures to make sure, and Remus fights a smile as he nods.

This. This is the man that attempted to remove the mask from his face without even asking. He's so...unexpected.

His hair is curling over his shoulder in damp ringlets again, just like the first night that Remus saw him, glossy in the overhead lights. Remus can smell his shampoo, something like rosemary and mint. Sirius stares at the machine, hands limp on the counter, and then he looks at Remus, visibly lost.

Remus struggles not to laugh. He doesn't think he's struggled this much in a long time. "You were watching, weren't you?"

"Yeah, *you,"* Sirius replies, then immediately starts falling over his words. "I mean, not—I wasn't —I just meant, I was watching how you were—"

"Sirius," Remus interrupts, and he gets a thrill from doing so. He wouldn't be able to do that with anyone else, but Sirius lets him. He even snaps his mouth shut, his cheeks red. "I'll just show you again. I promise it's not complicated."

Sirius nods, his blush spreading, and Remus marvels for a second that *this* is the Sirius Black famous for being a smooth, charming man that can beguile anyone he meets. So far, Remus has learned that Sirius is a stuttering mess, mostly. A beautiful stuttering mess, but still. It's not exactly what Remus was expecting from the man rumored to have a string of satisfied lovers all throughout the Hallow. Remus likes the beautiful stuttering mess more, if he's honest.

Remus grabs the onion and knocks it down to the counter, then grips it and cracks it open right down the middle, putting one half aside for Sirius to use and showing him how to use the machine with the other. Sirius briefly goes into a coughing fit, but he bangs on his chest and blinks rapidly, muttering that he's fine as he watches intently.

When it's Sirius' turn, something goes wrong.

"I think I broke it," Sirius whispers, eyes wide.

"You didn't break it."

"Remus, I'm pretty sure I broke it. The tray won't come out."

"Hold on, let me see," Remus says, yet again struggling not to laugh at the wariness in Sirius' tone. He offers him a small smile and tugs the machine closer, lifting it to peer at it from the bottom. After a beat, he hums and drops it. "Well, you broke it. Lovely. They're going to take my fingers for this."

Sirius makes an odd choking noise. *"What?* No, that's not—"

"I'm joking," Remus cuts in with a snort, reaching out to press the maintenance button. It starts to whir. "You just held the chopper too long, so the onion got caught in the mechanism. Give it a moment, and it'll spit it out."

"Oh, don't do that. You nearly gave me a heart attack," Sirius blurts out, staring at him incredulously.

"Yes, sir," Remus says, inclining his head.

"No. No, I didn't mean—that wasn't an order, or—I mean, I don't give orders. Don't do what I say."

"Ever?"

"Well, not if you don't want to. Just—do whatever you want."

"Yes, sir."

"You don't—Remus, you don't have to call me that," Sirius tells him, a strain in his voice.

Remus can't keep a straight face anymore. Helplessly, a smile breaks out onto his face. "Yeah, still joking, Sirius."

"Oh." Sirius blinks at him. He has unfairly thick and long eyelashes. "You're fucking with me."

"Quite a bit, yes," Remus admits. Sirius huffs a startled laugh, shaking his head in awe. "Sorry, you'll have to forgive me. I don't get to fuck with anyone anymore. I miss it."

Sirius clears his throat and leans up against the counter, chewing on his lip. "How long has it been since you've gotten to? You don't have to answer, of course."

"Five years," Remus answers anyway. Knowing he doesn't have to makes him feel comfortable doing so. "I've been a servant for five years."

"Not here," Sirius declares, sounding certain. "I've never seen you here before."

"Maybe you just didn't notice me," Remus murmurs, flicking his gaze towards him, curious.

"No, I definitely would have noticed you," Sirius says, looking down at his hands where he plays restlessly with his fingers. He's still biting his lower lip. Remus hopes he never stops.

"You're right. Sort of," Remus tells him, and Sirius' head snaps up, eyebrows furrowed. "For the first three years, no, I wasn't here. The last two, yes, but I wasn't allowed to work at any gathering events, and I'd never been assigned to work with you, so that's why you never saw me."

"You weren't allowed to work events?"

"Too many penalties."

"Penalties," Sirius echoes, baffled.

Remus chuckles. "Servants gain penalties for not doing their duties properly, or any unacceptable behavior. They come from complaints. You're looking at a repeat offender of daring to roll my eyes. Oh, and once, I *accidentally* spilled wine on a government official's very nice shirt."

"Accidentally?" Sirius asks, lips curling up.

"He made a bet on someone dying in the games, and he was laughing and boasting because he won the bet, rather than reacting like anyone sane and being upset that someone had just died," Remus explains. "So, no, not accidentally."

Sirius looks at him with blatant respect. Remus can *see* it, that gleam in his eyes, something heavy and warm. "Yeah? Well, good. It's the least he deserved. What do the penalties mean?"

"Punishment. Further conditioning. Particular assignments that keep them from having the opportunity to mess up anywhere else," Remus says. "Too many penalties is death, but no one knows how many. I had four before I got my shit together enough to end up here."

"We won't complain, if that helps. You could quite literally pour an entire bottle of wine on my head, and we still wouldn't complain," Sirius tells him, and Remus laughs. It makes Sirius grin at him. "Is there a reward system, or something? What if I give you a glowing review? What do you get?"

"Nothing," Remus replies, and Sirius' grin fades. Remus doesn't like that, so he tugs on the tray, watching it pop out with the chopped onion on it. "There you are. One chopped onion. See? You didn't break it."

"Which is fortunate. You know how some people like to tinker? Like, you put things in their hands, and they'll fix them or build something out of them?"

"I suppose."

"Yeah, well, I'm the opposite," Sirius informs him sheepishly, holding up his hands. "I'm really fucking destructive, usually not even meaning to be. I just—I pick things apart. Ruin them. So, you know, if you ever need something broken, I'm your man." He sighs and puts his hands down. "Sorry, I don't think I'm going to be much help. I might *actually* break something."

Remus can see this is a sore point for him, and it makes his heart clench in his chest in a way he thought nothing in the Hallow ever could. "Well, it's good that I don't need your help, isn't it? You're here because I want your company, remember? You can't really get that wrong."

Like before, Sirius' entire face goes so red that Remus almost pities him. The flush dips all the way down his neck, too. Has no one ever wanted him for his company before, just to have him around? That's incredibly sad, Remus can't help but think. He's not a servant, not as Remus is, so why does no one see him? Remus sees him. He's looking right at him, and he has no desire to look away. That's not proper, and he *really* shouldn't, but he's not good at being proper or doing what he should.

"I really could," Sirius mumbles as he looks away. "Get it wrong, I mean. Trust me, Remus, I really could."

"I don't think so." Remus ducks his head to catch his gaze, smiling at him. "Prove me wrong. I dare you."

"Well, if you insist," Sirius breathes out, then proceeds to lift himself on the counter, swinging his legs like a child and grinning like he can't help it, like he's so pleased to be here.

Remus goes back to cooking, and Sirius starts talking, and by the time the meal is ready, the only thing Sirius has succeeded in doing is proving Remus right.

Chapter End Notes

new POV unlocked!!!!

remus, my beloved <3 i can't believe people were worried that i would kill remus off. REMUS??? the light and love of my life???? pfft, i would never recover. he may have hard times, but don't worry, remus is safe.

also marlene, my love. and we got a lot of mentions of other people we will eventually see more of.

also², im sure you recognized some names of other tributes, and on that, i have no comment.

im reminding myself of the no rambling in the notes rule, so im gonna shut up now and let you all come up with your own theories and conclusions!

thanks for reading <3 see you saturday!

Training Day Two and Three

Chapter Notes

hey-o! happy saturday, everyone! i think you're going to like this chapter :)

warnings:

-brief and vague references to sirius' struggles after he got out of the arena, but nothing too heavy
-references to murder (in self-defense) in the name of explaining weapons
-the common theme of death (because of the whole fighting to the death in the arena thing)
-some light (non-violent) sparring
-flirting. ridiculous amounts of flirting.

and yeah, im pretty sure that's it. this is surprisingly a light chapter. it's even sort of fun, actually.

enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus is already tired of this, and it's only day two. He's been in the Hallow for three days altogether, and he just wants to go home, at this point. Instead, for the second time, he's walking into the training room with James and strict instructions to never stray too far from him.

Yeah, Regulus is the unluckiest sod in the world.

James, meanwhile, beams at another tribute and waves happily at her. The young girl perks up a little and waves back. Rather cheerfully, James says, "That's Vanity Clyde. She has three siblings, all younger, and a mild obsession with bugs."

"Right," Regulus mutters, struggling not to grimace. Oh, he wishes James didn't know that. He wishes James wouldn't get so invested in people; it's going to break his fucking heart when they die. "I'm going to get daggers."

"I'll come with you."

"Of course you will."

"Sirius *literally* told me to," James reminds him.

Regulus rolls his eyes as they move through the room. There are a lot of gazes on them at the moment, watching their every move. "You just do everything Sirius says, do you?"

"Well, don't you?" James challenges.

"No," Regulus snaps, as if he's not doing exactly that. He can't help it. Sirius has been through this before, and if there is anyone in this world who Regulus trusts wholeheartedly, no matter what, it's Sirius. When it comes down to life and death—and this certainly is—Sirius is who he looks to.

It's ironic, really, because with everything else… Well, in day-to-day life back home, Regulus didn't look to Sirius for anything, and Sirius didn't really give him anything to look *at.* When he returned a Victor, he'd come home lost, as if he did lose, as if parts of him died in that arena. Whatever those parts were, they were the parts that Regulus had claim to, and then they were gone. Never seen again.

James was the only one who had Sirius after that. It was *James* that Sirius needed, not Regulus. Sirius couldn't even look at him sometimes. It was equally hard for Regulus to look at Sirius, knowing that everything that happened to him was his fault. All those parts of him that died when he won, Regulus is the one who killed them, and he didn't even choose to. Sirius made that choice for him when he volunteered.

Sirius never said it. He has never said it, and Regulus thinks he will die before he ever admits it, but Regulus is sure that Sirius regrets taking his place.

But it's Regulus' turn now, and all of those issues can't exist here, as Sirius said. It's about surviving, and of course Regulus instinctively looks to Sirius for that. If not for Sirius, Regulus wouldn't have survived to make it here at all.

"So, how do you know which ones you'll like?" James whispers directly in his ear when they stop in front of an entire display of various daggers.

Regulus jerks away, the proximity of him and the warmth of his breath over Regulus' neck making his skin prickle. He huffs. "Can I just—have a little space? Sirius didn't say you need to stand on *top* of me, James. Fucking hell."

"Well, he didn't say I *couldn't,"* James replies, grinning when Regulus cuts him a sharp look, but he's dutifully stepping away, giving him the space he's asked for. "But really, how do you know which ones you'll like? There are...a lot."

There are, in fact, a lot of different daggers. There are traditional daggers, made of different metals; small, yet deadly push-daggers; karambits, with the curved, claw-like blade; stilettos with the thin, needle-like blade; and there's even a selection of balisongs, or butterfly knives, as they're known. Regulus feels like a child stepping into a sweet shop, except it's just him and a variety of pointy weapons. He would like one of each, please.

"These aren't the most efficient option, depending on the situation, even if they're fun," Regulus murmurs as he picks up a balisong. "You have to be quick and practiced to open them if they're closed, and if you're not fast enough, it could cost you your life."

"Are you fast?" James asks.

"Yes," Regulus says, then shows him. Sirius made him one of these once, quite literally building the mechanism for it. For months and months, Regulus practiced with it, walking around with small band-aids on his fingers, cuts all over his hands from where he repeatedly used it. He has a few scars on his knuckles from it even now, faint and tiny.

This one isn't really like his other one, so it takes him a few swings and rolls of his wrist to really get used to it, but once he has it, he *has it.* There's a pattern to it, influenced by weight distribution and the knowledge of what motion you've taken, where the blade is going and where it's been. In seconds, he has it open, then shut right back again.

"That's—that's really—" James stares at him, darting his gaze between Regulus' hand and face.

"These are especially good for hand-to-hand, *particularly* very close range," Regulus says as he sits the balisong down to pick up one of the push-daggers. The handle sits in his palm, fingers curled down beneath the small blade. He lifts it up in front of James' nose, watching his eyes cross. "They're not hard to use, very good for self-defense. If you find one, keep it on you. It's easy to stab someone in the throat if they're pinning you to the ground, or anywhere you can reach, really."

"Noted," James mumbles.

Regulus drops it and hovers his hand over the karambits, picking up one with a hum. "A karambit. You don't hold them with the blade held up. Your pointer finger goes through the open hole here, and the blade curves outwards like this." He grips it and turns his arm to the side so James can see. "It's good to keep a defensive stance, and then you can swing your arm out, almost like you're punching them, but aim to slit their throat instead. One in each hand is ideal, honestly, for the most effective range of motion."

"Regulus," James says quietly, "how...do you know this?"

"How does anyone know anything?" Regulus replies, swinging the blade around on his finger. James' eyes track the motion, up and over. "I have books. I've paid attention. I've even owned some like these—or as close as you can get when you're making them at home. Sirius—well, he used to make them for me before he came out of the arena. He stopped after that."

"Sirius…" James pauses, staying quiet as Regulus puts the karambit away, hovering his hand over the others with a pensive expression. "It wasn't—that had nothing to do with you, Reg. You know that, don't you? He wasn't trying to give up on you, if that's what you think. He just—he came out feeling...wrong. Really, really wrong. He doesn't build things anymore, did you know that? Hasn't in ten years. He used to make things, fix things, and now—" James swallows harshly and looks away. "Now he just feels like he breaks things. It wasn't that he didn't want to build for you, Regulus. It was that he forgot how."

"It affected me, but I never needed that from him," Regulus whispers, hand gently sitting down on one of the more traditional daggers, one made for throwing and hand-to-hand. "I just needed him to be...him."

"He forgot that, too," James says sadly.

"He remembered eventually."

"And where were you?"

"I said he remembered himself," Regulus declares, an edge to his tone sharp enough to rival the blades in front of him. He lifts his gaze to James'. "I didn't say he remembered *me."*

"Believe it or not," James tells him, "you were never one of the things that he forgot."

Regulus shakes his head and plucks up three daggers in quick succession. "Leave it, James. I'm not talking about it anymore. I'm going to throw these. If you follow, shut up."

With that, Regulus swivels on his heel and marches off towards the stalls where he can throw his daggers. Between the conversation he and James just had and the weight of all the gazes on him that he can't escape, he feels tense and coiled tight, his hair standing on end, braced for an impact that won't come for a few more days yet. The suspense of it is making his bones ache. He wishes he could turn back time.

James does dutifully follow along, but of course, he does not shut up as requested. He does thankfully drop the subject of Sirius, though. "What about these daggers?"

"More traditional. Good for close range, but also throwing. Multipurpose enough that you can hold them however you wish to utilize them—stabbing, slicing, things such as that. You have options, and plenty," Regulus explains.

"Pretty little things, aren't they?" James muses, head cocking with a lopsided grin as Regulus swivels one of the daggers in his palm and gets into position.

"Oh, yes. Pretty," Regulus says flatly, then lifts his hand and exhales as he snaps his hand out, letting the dagger fly through the air towards the target. It lands with a loud thud, buried to the hilt right in the middle of the figure's forehead.

"Could have been luck," James hedges, eyes bright when Regulus snaps his head towards him in disbelief. James bites his lip, like he's trying not to grin. "Do it again, but aim for the left arm, just above the elbow."

"Your left or the figure's left?"

"My left."

Regulus narrows his eyes slightly, then turns back around, lazily swiveling the dagger in his palm again. After a beat, he raises his arm and sends it flying, watching in satisfaction as it lands exactly where James challenged him to put it. He turns back with his eyebrows, tossing the last dagger up and catching it over and over.

"Luck?" Regulus asks, lips twitching.

"If I put an apple on my head, could you—"

"Yes."

"What if I was running?"

"Yes."

"Trick question. The apple would fall."

"Oh, sorry, I thought the question was if I could still put a dagger in the side of your fucking skull."

James chokes out a laugh, his head thrown back in delight, and when he calms a few moments later, he steps forward and holds out his hand. "Alright, well, maybe it's easy. Let me give it a go, yeah?"

"If you're interested in embarrassing yourself, sure, carry on," Regulus replies, tossing the dagger up to catch it by the blade to hold it out hilt-first.

"You're so mean," James whispers, like it's a secret, but the sort that you're excited to keep. He steps up when Regulus steps back, and immediately no.

"No," Regulus says, stepping forward again, reaching out to grab James by his shoulder, moving to lightly nudge at his ankles with his shoes. He grabs James by his hip and twists him a little, then steps back. "Alright, continue."

James raises his arm.

"No," Regulus interrupts again, swiveling around to stand by his arm, tapping underneath his elbow, twisting his wrist. James nearly drops the dagger because his grip is so slack, and Regulus

clicks his tongue as he slides his hand up to cover James' fingers with his own, pushing them down. "You want to keep your grip light, but not *too* light when you're throwing. Stabbing requires a firm grip. The last thing you want is for it to go flying if—James, are you even listening to me?"

"What? Yes. Throw light. Firm stab. Got it, carry on. *Please* carry on," James tells him, watching him intently.

"James, this is quite literally life or death. Now is not the time to discover you have a knife kink," Regulus hisses.

"No time like the present," James corrects, grinning.

"Stop," Regulus chastises, swatting him on the shoulder, and James' grin softens into something sweeter. Regulus averts his eyes from it, because looking at it is hard, and it doesn't really feel like he deserves to see it. "I'm trying to *help you.* This applies to your hatchet as well, you know."

James sighs, growing more serious. "Alright, alright."

"Throw as you extend, not before and not after. Don't lean too hard in any direction, because that can guide the blade. You have to consider the force and direction of wind, as well as distance, and also judge the force in which you need to throw it so the blade lands instead of the hilt."

"That's—a lot."

"Seems that way, yes, but it does become instinct after enough practice. Think of it as an extension of *you.* That helps."

"Right, got it. Can I try now?"

"Sure," Regulus says, stepping back again, and to his credit, James does seem to try to follow his advice. Still, Regulus can see where he's gotten it wrong as soon as he lets go, so he's saying, "No," before the hilt even hits the wall next to the target and lands on the floor with a dull clatter.

"You know, this is your fault," James announces.

Regulus rears back. *"My* fault? I tried to help you."

"Well, with all that unnecessary touching, I got distracted."

"Unnecessary touch—there was no unnecessary touching!"

James hums, planting his hands on his hips. "There was an excess amount of touching, Regulus. You knew what you were doing, and the joke's on you, because while it may have worked, I'm not the least bit embarrassed by it."

"James," Regulus grits out, raising his hand to point towards the targets, "go get my daggers."

"Bossy," James mutters, flashing him a grin before he winks and dutifully jogs to do as he's told.

Regulus heaves a sigh. It's going to be a long day.

He's not wrong, either. It's a long day. As much as he would like to just stand around, throwing daggers all day, that's not all he's supposed to do. James also drags him around to talk to people, as if they're not possible threats.

James and Regulus now come with more knowledge on the other tributes, things that Sirius has learned already, like who some of their mentors are—which apparently matters—but there's still more to learn. Threat levels to assess. Allies to cement.

There's Peter, who is very funny and comforting, but those aren't skills to help in the arena. He spends most of his second day on survival skills, seeming to have given up on weapons altogether. Peter talks quickly and calmly interchangeably, easy to drown out when he's speaking rapidly, but impossible to ignore when he's drawing you in with his soothing tone. Again, not a skill to save his life. He's no threat, and Regulus tries not to learn anything about him the way James does, because he's quite sure Peter's fear of being one of the first to die is going to come true. James already gets on with him so well that it actually tugs at Regulus' heartstrings.

What's interesting is that Peter's mentor is Dolohov, which Sirius had informed them with derision in his tone. It's the same mentor that Bernice has, and that would make Regulus suspicious if not

for the fact that Sirius basically stated outright that Dolohov has no use for Peter. He's apparently already made it clear that Bernice is his favorite, the one he wants to win and who he plans to get sponsors for. So, not only is Peter not at all prepared for the arena, but he's essentially been abandoned by his mentor already, which is just...fucked, honestly.

There's Vanity, the young girl who really likes bugs. She spends literally all of her time at the bug station, endlessly fascinated by them. James keeps trying to encourage her to at least go to other survival stations, but she just shrugs him off. Sirius, strangely enough, didn't mention who her mentor was.

There's Dylan, who quite blatantly has a crush on James. He gets flustered every time James smiles at him, or reaches out to touch his shoulder. He's younger, but not by much at twenty-one, and he also doesn't have that many skills when it comes to weapons, but he's *very* good at starting fires. He does it faster than Regulus has seen anyone manage to yet. Threat level: low. Regulus still doesn't like him.

There's Irene, twenty-three years old, and yet another who also has a strong reaction to James. She drops countless hints about them sneaking out of the training room together, all of which go right over James' head entirely. She laughs at literally everything he says, even when he's not really making jokes, and of course James likes *that.* It pleases him, the reaction of unspoken praise; he likes to make people laugh, always has. Regulus rolls his eyes so much that it's a miracle they don't roll right out of his head. Irene's skills are *not* nonexistent, though, which she proves on the second day. She wields a sword like she's been trained for it, clearly practiced, and *clearly* a threat. Her mentor is a friend of Sirius' named Frank Longbottom. Regulus also doesn't like her.

There's Mathias, who is eighteen, and they're very friendly. They remind Regulus of James, actually, if not a bit quieter. They've improved with the crossbow, and they do take the time to go learn about surviving skills, so they're getting a variety. Threat level: medium. Regulus likes them for the most part, but he still tries not to learn too much about them. Like Irene, their mentor is also Frank.

Finally, there's Evan. On the second day, he's at the rope station yet again, repeatedly tying knots or pulling himself up, as well as swinging between them. No one really bothers him, or seems to notice him at all. His fellow tribute is a teenage girl named Juniper, the one who spent the entire day pummeling a training dummy with a club; she does it again the second day as well, like she has a lot of frustration to work through. People keep a wide berth from her, which may be the point, honestly. Regulus sympathizes with her. Their mentor is yet another friend of Sirius' named Emmeline Vance, and he warned not to underestimate her tributes.

As for Evan, he doesn't seem to really mind that James and Regulus approach him. He teaches them a few knots when they ask, and he listens when they explain some of the things they've learned at the survival station, but it's clear he's not here to make friends. There is a quiet mutual

respect between them, though, for the exchange of information; a sort of 'you scratch my back, I scratch yours' situation. Regulus doesn't *think* Evan would immediately attack him if they ran into each other, but he doesn't *know* that, not for sure. Threat level: ?

The death eaters have expanded from just Mulciber, Avery, Bernice, and Hodge to now include three more people. There's Willa, Axus, and Quinn. Willa is a young girl around Hodge's age, but she's lethal with a bow and arrows, which seems to be her ticket in. Axus has crafted a fucking hook on the end of a rope that they can toss with frightening precision, repeatedly dragging various objects and training dummies across the room. Quinn is like Hodge, Regulus is sure, in that she's another disposable wink link for them to turn on first.

Mulciber and Avery share a mentor, who is—much to Regulus' discomfort—Lucius Malfoy. Technically, Regulus' cousin-in-law, which he's doing his level best not to think about. Bernice has Dolohov, like Peter, and again, Sirius warned not to underestimate her. Axus and Willa have the same mentor as well, a man named Yaxley, who generally has death eaters every year, like Lucius and Dolohov. Sirius didn't mention Hodge and Quinn's mentors at all.

The remaining ten either stick to themselves, or their fellow tributes, and that's it. They go out of their way to avoid others, to the point that they'll walk away if anyone approaches them.

By the end of the day, Regulus is tired, both physically and mentally. James has improved with his hatchet, at least a little. Enough that his chances of survival in a fight aren't so low that they make Regulus' stomach drop out from beneath him just thinking about it.

Despite his exhaustion, the time for rest is still far away, because he and James have to meet with their stylist.

Dorcas is…

Well, Regulus has never seen a Hallow look so much like a Hallow and also like no other Hallow he's ever seen, but all at once. She's striking, quite frankly. Her braids are styled on top of her head with silver clasps and ornaments weaved through, and her dark skin has a faint shimmer of silver dusting as well, but her dress looks like dripping obsidian, the sturdiness of stone while looking as if it's made of velvet. There's a necklace around her neck with three words written in small cursive letters, *Hallow is Hollow,* which is quite the statement. Her fingers are covered in rings that connect with her bracelet, and she has one of those finger armor-covers that come to a point, which she taps to the arm of the chair as she flicks her gaze between Regulus and James critically.

James, being James, eventually can't stand the silence anymore, and the first thing he blurts out is,

"So, um, your necklace… Did you, er, make that, or...?"

"This?" Dorcas' hand flutters up to it. "Yes, I designed it. Do you like it?"

"It's—bold," James admits, blinking at her.

Dorcas hums. "Well, I'm a very bold person, James. Would you say the same?"

"I mean, I suppose," James replies, eyebrows furrowed.

"Yes," Regulus answers for him. "Don't let him fool you. He's one of the most audacious people you'll ever meet." James glances over at him, looking started, but visibly pleased. "That wasn't a compliment, James."

"Yes, it was," Dorcas corrects bluntly. She threads her fingers together on her crossed legs, her rings clinking together. "I design in bold. It's a compliment." She pauses, flicking her gaze between them. "I won't lie, this is my first year styling for tributes. I'd like to represent you in a way that is both meaningful and a political statement."

"By which you mean…?"

"Let's call it...thought-provoking. Everyone in the Hallow is asleep. I want to wake them up."

Regulus shares a brief look with James, then focuses back on Dorcas. "With fashion?"

"With *expression,"* Dorcas tells him. "That speaks to them, and I want to make something they can't look away from. They'll all be looking at you, so let's make sure they see something important, shall we?"

Sirius and Pandora, who have been quietly murmuring to each other off to the side, stop and look up, clearly paying attention. Again, James and Regulus share another look, a bit longer this time. When they look away, they both lean forward.

"What did you have in mind?" James asks.

Dorcas smiles.

~•~

James isn't really sure what to expect from day three of training, but he and Regulus have their objective. Get in, practice more, learn more, and do some hand-to-hand; sounds simple enough, really.

Again, a lot of eyes are on him and Regulus as soon as they enter the room. That's getting old, at this point. It's like half of them expect them to start trouble, while the other half expect them to start fighting each other. The tension gets under his skin and makes it harder to keep focused.

"Oh, hi," James says, brightening up when Peter comes over to greet him. "How do you beat us here every time?"

"Brilliant time management, courtesy of my mentor," Peter tells him with a chuckle.

"Sirius wouldn't know time management if it jumped up and bit him," Regulus mutters, rolling his eyes.

James snorts. "This is true. The poor thing looks miserable when he has to wake up early. He's always been a bit of a night owl, if I'm honest. He used to say it was a star thing."

"A star thing," Regulus repeats, eyes narrowed.

"Being named after a star, I suppose. It only made sense, he said, because stars are awake and active in the night sky, so why shouldn't he be?" James says fondly.

Regulus scoffs. "I'm named after a star, too, you know."

"I know," James murmurs, lips curling up. "That doesn't really go against what he says, though.

You *also* like to be up and about at night. I've never seen someone look as grumpy as you do when you've been woken up early, *except* for Sirius."

"Yes, well…" Regulus trails off, clearly unable to refute Sirius' claim. He doesn't so much as admit defeat as he refuses to accept it by pursing his lips and looking away.

So stubborn, James thinks, fighting a smile.

"I saw you yesterday, you know," Peter says, drawing James' attention again. "With the hatchets, I mean. You're actually quite good. I've heard whispers…" Peter glances around and steps closer, lowering his voice. "The others—Mulciber and that whole group—they've been talking about it."

James nods. "I'm sure they have."

"What have they been saying?" Regulus asks, and Peter blinks at him. "You heard them talking, so what did they say?"

Peter shrugs awkwardly. "Nothing too much, really. Just that James is more of a threat than they thought. Seemed too soft to worry about at first, they said." He pauses, reaching up to scratch his nose. "They also—well, I heard them say that you're shaping up to be exactly the threat they anticipated. You're fucking deadly with those daggers, honestly."

"I know," is all Regulus says.

"Right." Peter visibly gulps. "Right, well, I'm going to go...do something. Yeah. Bye, then."

"Lovely," James mumbles with a sigh as he watches Peter quickly shuffle away. "You're scaring our allies."

"Your allies. I don't have allies," Regulus replies, unrepentant.

"What's mine is yours," James tells him.

Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "Do they know that?"

"They know that," James admits, because they do. He's made that very clear from day one; they're very aware that Regulus is a priority to him, and he's not to be harmed. Not that anyone James gets on with actually wants to hurt anyone at all, but that's besides the point. The point is, they know. "Come on, let's do another circuit of the survival skills portion, then practice with weapons, and we can close the day out by getting on the mat and giving everyone a show."

"Oh, is that the plan?"

"That's the plan. And also, mingling."

"Mingling," Regulus grumbles under his breath, like he detests the idea, but he doesn't complain further. Again, James has to fight a smile as he leads him away.

So, that's how they spend the day.

In between the survival skills portion, James checks in with the people he's gotten comfortable with by now. Vanity is, of course, at the bug station. She brightens as soon as she sees him, and even Regulus is a bit softer with her, likely because of her youth. James talks to her about her siblings by name (Divan, Curio, and Hoosier), listens to her chatter about bugs, and tells her a bit about his parents. Vanity gives him and Regulus a lesson on bugs to watch out for, either because they're dangerous, or because they're good for protein, which James honestly doesn't want to think about. The last thing he wants to do is eat bugs, but...well, you never know, right?

Following Vanity is Irene at the plant station, who gives up on trying to identify the poisonous ones in favor of talking to him, telling him all about her friends back home as he dutifully listens. James likes her, but it's clear that Regulus does not. He rolls his eyes and takes over at the plant station, making snide comments under his breath that Irene outright ignores. James isn't sure *why* Regulus has such an issue with her, honestly. She's really quite nice.

They meet Dylan at the fire-starting station, and he admits he likes it there because it's the one thing he's really good at. Regulus also doesn't like him, for whatever reason that James can't see. James likes Dylan; he's sweet, and a bit nervous, and he talks about his best friend back home with the same kind of ferocious devotion and love that James feels for Sirius.

James crosses paths with Peter again, pausing to smooth over Regulus frightening him before. Like

with most things, James has learned, Peter bounces back easily. He and James chat for quite a bit until they're both in stitches, wheezing with laughter as they hold onto each other's shoulders so they won't fall over. Regulus stands off to the side and looks bored.

Mathias is found practicing with the crossbow, which James and Regulus learn on their way to start with weapons. As soon as they approach, Mathias looks up with a grin. They instantly launch into an excited recount of how much they've improved with the crossbow (twenty out of twenty-six shots so far), and James beams at them, genuinely proud of their progress. They talk to Regulus and James for a few minutes, but they're clearly focused—or *in the zone,* as they call it—so James and Regulus leave them to it, heading to start practicing as well.

James doesn't really like utilizing the hatchets as weapons, if he's honest, but he knows he needs to be prepared. He wants to make it through without hurting anyone, but he doubts that will be possible if his goal is to get Regulus home, which it still is. Practicing with a weapon is really just getting your body prepped with the motion memory, because there's no true preparation for the real thing—that's what Sirius said, and James believes him. He can't imagine *actually* harming another human being, can't even picture it, and yet that's the reality that's sprinting right for him at full velocity.

Meanwhile, Regulus uses his daggers like… Well, there's no hesitation whatsoever. He's confident with them, as well as *precise.* Dangerous. Deadly, even. People are smart to be wary of Regulus and his daggers; as previously established, though, James is stupid, so of course he's fascinated by it. His eyes are drawn to Regulus over and over, watching how he moves, watching the calm coil of his body as he wields his weapons. Pretty little things, indeed.

After they finish with that, towards the end of the day, James and Regulus stop by to see Evan at the rope station again. He's like Vanity in that he's clearly found his thing, and he's doing *nothing else.* All anyone knows about him is that he's good at tying knots and climbing ropes, which isn't a lot, really. James can't tell if he's friendly or not, but he doesn't ever seem upset when they speak to him. He doesn't divulge personal information or seem to care about theirs, but he seems open to them sharing things they've learned, and every time they do, he makes sure to teach them something as well.

Regulus manages to draw a brief, quiet chuckle out of Evan, just once, and that oddly makes James feel better. It makes him worry less that Evan would take the opportunity to kill them the moment he found it, if not hunt them down. Now, at least, James *thinks* that Evan would maybe, possibly back away if they did, instead of immediately trying to fight, so there's that.

As the day starts to draw to an end, before the evaluations being held in the evening, James follows Regulus to one of the mats off to the side. It's not directly in the center of the room, but everyone will be able to see them. They both kick off their shoes, then step up.

"No damage to the face," James reminds Regulus, because Sirius had been *very* clear on that, and so had Pandora. They want no visible bruises before the upcoming interviews.

"I know," Regulus says, rolling his eyes. "I'm not going to punch you in the face, James."

"Well, you've already done it once," James teases, grinning when Regulus' face turns red.

"That was an *accident,"* Regulus mumbles, "and I thought we agreed to never talk about it."

"No, you just demanded that I never mention it."

"Which you're ignoring."

"You gave me a nosebleed."

"I was *thirteen."*

James chuckles and bounces on the balls of his feet. "A very feisty thirteen year old, going around assaulting people."

"You broke into my house through my window!" Regulus sputters. "It was the middle of the night. I thought you were an intruder. What was I supposed to do in that situation?"

"Well, I didn't expect you to scream, roll out of bed, and punch me in the face," James admits, laughing helplessly as Regulus' face glows brighter. "I thought it was Sirius' room, you know that. All I wanted to do was sneak into my best friend's room, and instead, his little brother nearly broke my nose."

"And now I'm tempted to again," Regulus grumbles.

James shakes his head and bounces some more, his chest warm at the memory. He had really been

trying to sneak into Sirius' room, so he wasn't at all prepared for the fist that collided with his face as soon as he slipped through the window. As soon as Regulus realized it was him, he'd started stuttering apologies as James groaned and bent over, clutching his face because it had fucking *hurt.* He remembers that it had left him stunned, though, dazed as he'd stared at a rambling Regulus in pure disbelief, so startled because he never even saw him coming. That's a common theme with him, really.

Regulus had been so embarrassed, and he'd rushed to get a towel for James' nose, his cheeks red. He'd nearly been in tears. James remembers sitting on his bed as Regulus apologized over and over, then laughing helplessly, only to groan at the pain that caused. Regulus had held the towel to his face until James smiled at him, and then he'd turned red again and left quickly to go get Sirius. Of course, when Sirius heard what happened, he'd laughed so hard that he actually had to lay on the floor, and poor Regulus looked like he wanted to crawl under his bed and never come out again.

Those were simpler times. Back before Sirius went into the arena. Back before Regulus hated James. Back before James knew what it was to feel like a failure. They were so young.

"Are you going to stand there all day, or…?" Regulus raises his eyebrows and shifts on his feet ever so slightly.

"Best not to leave it to a tap out," James muses, lips curling up at the corners. "You're so stubborn that you'd never."

"Well, at least you know," Regulus replies, a flash of amusement passing through his eyes.

James nods, and then he moves in. He hasn't really done anything like this with anyone other than Sirius, but he *has* done it enough *with* Sirius that he knows what to do. In a way, it's like a dance, one where your partner is actually your opponent and you have to anticipate their steps while doing your best not to give your own away. You have to pay attention and focus, relying on defense and offense interchangeably, knowing which one is most efficient.

Regulus has likely never done this with anyone other than Sirius either, so this means he knows all the same things that James knows. Like James, he doesn't tense up, and he remains watchful of every move James makes.

Distantly, James knows that people are watching them, that they've gathered something of a crowd, but he doesn't care. His world narrows down to Regulus, and that's it.

There's the first few tentative shifts of their bodies circling each other like a dance, or a stand-off, and then Regulus skips backwards when James makes the first swipe for him, light on his feet. It happens again, then again, and then James picks up on how to anticipate it, catching his arm. Regulus immediately grabs James' hand and whirls around, twisting it around his back. He uses the momentum to shove James in the back, sending him stumbling forward a few steps.

When James turns back around, Regulus is still in the same place, loose and relaxed. Huffing a laugh under his breath, James shakes his head and moves in again.

"You and your evasive maneuvers," James mutters as Regulus once again dances out of range.

Regulus sends him a quick smile, there-and-gone in a flash. Oh, he's enjoying this. "Surely you didn't think I would make it *easy,* did you, James?"

"You? Never," James says. "Less fun that way anyway."

"This isn't about fun. This is about survival."

"Who says it can't be both?"

"Only you would think that way," Regulus tells him.

James grins and shifts forward, catching Regulus' elbow when he starts to lift it and hooking his foot around the back of his calf to sweep his legs right out from underneath him. Regulus goes down, hitting the mat with a thud and a soft wheeze, the breath knocked from his lungs. James peers down at him smugly. "See? That was fun."

Regulus narrows his eyes, and then James yelps when cold fingers wrap around his ankle and *yank.* Again, he doesn't see it coming, so he trips backwards, and Regulus lifts his leg and *pushes* so that James goes down. James lands pretty hard, groaning once he's there, blinking rapidly. It takes him a second to catch his breath, and then he's rolling over in just enough time to catch Regulus' wrist.

There's a brief struggle, Regulus' knee hitting James in the stomach and James twisting Regulus' arm back. They roll, then roll again, and then Regulus rolls right on top of him, gripping James by the wrists and slamming him down to the mat.

"Still having fun?" Regulus asks, somehow managing to arch an eyebrow even as his chest heaves from exertion.

"So much," James wheezes, then rolls his wrists and bucks his hips as he flings himself to the side. He weaves an arm over and under Regulus', shoving him face down as he drops his knee into the middle of Regulus' back. He could wrench Regulus' arm up, but there would be no point, seeing as he'd let James break it before he'd ever tap.

Regulus curses under his breath, letting his forehead press to the mat as he breathes hard. His body is tense, and James sees the sweat that slides over the back of his neck, disappearing into his collarbone. After a beat, Regulus relaxes all at once, then reaches back with his free hand to hook his fingers in the crook of James' bent knee. He snatches on it at the same time that he rocks his body to the side, making James sway and nearly fall over. Regulus manages to turn over underneath him, freeing his arm, but now James is just straddling his hips and frantically trying to grapple for his wrists.

It doesn't work very well, honestly. Regulus just knocks his hands away, grabs onto James' hips, and fully *tosses* him to the side, using the momentum of his own roll to counteract James' weight. Yet again, James hits the mat, flat on his back, with a grunt and muffled curse. Regulus just follows him right over.

"Fucking stay down, would you?" James groans.

"You first," Regulus gasps out. He has James' hands caught between each knee and James' own body, holding them in place while one hand presses on the middle of James' chest. The other is holding James' shoulder, keeping him pinned.

James blows out a deep breath, his mind racing. He tries to wriggle his fingers, but Regulus' knees squeeze his sides tighter, keeping James' hands trapped. Honestly, James can't move much, or he doesn't think so. It takes him a minute to remember that he can bend his knees, and then he does just that, throwing his leg up into Regulus' back hard enough to displace him just the bit he needs to get his hands free.

As Regulus balances again, James locks his hands around each of Regulus' wrists in just enough time to yank his arms back as he lifts himself up. This shifts them a bit until Regulus is just sitting on James' thighs as James sits up and pins his arms behind his back. It puts them at an impasse, because Regulus can't get his hands free, and James can't get Regulus off of him, so they're pressed chest-to-chest, panting as they stare at each other and try to come up with what to do next.

"Well," James says, finally, "what now?"

"I'm thinking," Regulus admits.

James snorts weakly. "Oh, are you? Do take your time."

"I can't headbutt you, that would damage your face," Regulus complains. He pauses, then clears his throat. "And mine."

"Nice to know which one is the priority for you."

"You know, actually, I'm rethinking that decision. At this point, it would be worth it."

"Don't be a sore loser," James teases.

Regulus scoffs. "Are you joking? If I had my dagger, you'd be dead ten times over already."

"Mm, but you don't." James grins at him, then bites his lip when Regulus lets his head roll back as he groans. "Oh, don't do that. You're giving me all sorts of filthy ideas."

"Am I?" Regulus lifts his head and narrows his eyes at him, tugging on his hands, but James keeps his wrists firmly locked behind his back. Regulus huffs. "Well, realistically, I can't do anything else, and you can't do anything else, so that's that."

"There are a lot of things we could do in this position," James corrects, then grins when Regulus glares at him. "Oh, you meant the—right, sorry, I was thinking of other things."

"Sirius told you not to flirt with me."

"Yes, he did. *You* didn't. Funny, that."

"You won't be able to flirt with me when you're dead," Regulus informs him, the flush on his face not fading in the least.

James just hums. "Suppose I'll have to live long enough to keep doing it some more."

"If you get close enough to try, you won't get the chance."

"What are you going to do? Crawl in my lap and let me hold your hands behind your back? Oh no, I'm *terrified."*

"You have two seconds to let me go, or I'll just headbutt you and let Sirius yell at us," Regulus snaps. "One—"

"Alright, alright," James concedes, dropping his hands, because that's his *I'm not fucking around* voice. James has heard it enough over the years to know it well.

"Idiot," Regulus says as he immediately, without hesitation, slams James back down to the mat by his shoulders.

"You know, I'd say you've really come a long way," James murmurs breathlessly, hands settling on Regulus' hips—and he could attempt to throw him off, but he won't.

Regulus raises his eyebrows at him, hands going slack against James' shoulders, sliding further apart like he's feeling them beneath his palms. "Have I? How so?"

"Well, we've come from you punching me in the face when you were only thirteen, and now here you are at twenty-five, using me as a seat and manhandling me as you like," James tells him, huffing out a laugh as Regulus stops leaning down over him, slowly sitting up. As he does so, his hands slip over James' shoulders and slide down his chest. James *sees* Regulus catch his bottom lip between his teeth, eyes tracking the movement of his own hands. Struggling not to laugh, James squeezes his waist gently. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Sadly, yes, at least a little," Regulus confesses, which leaves James feeling rather triumphant, actually. Regulus shakes his head and gently taps James just between his lowest ribs, the hollow of

his stomach. "You are *unholy,* James, do you know that? It's not fair. You should *not* be this—this —"

"Fit? Attractive? Sexy? Irresistible?" James lists off.

"Athletically inclined," Regulus fills in with a scowl. A very cute scowl, but a scowl nonetheless.

James grins up at him. "You hate it, don't you?"

"With a burning passion."

"So you feel passion for me."

Regulus rolls his eyes and pushes his fist into James' stomach hard enough to make him grunt and curl up a little bit. With a thin smile, Regulus reaches out and pats James' cheek as he groans quietly. "Something like that."

"Brilliant. Love that for me," James wheezes as Regulus launches himself up off him. James presses both hands to his stomach, breathing hard, and then a hand is held out above him. Regulus waits, eyebrows raised, and James—after he catches his breath again—reaches up to take it.

"Again?" Regulus asks as he helps haul James to his feet.

James chuckles. "You're like a snake measuring my body to know precisely how you need to kill me." Regulus' lips twitch, but he doesn't deny it. James shakes his head and shifts on his feet. "Yeah, alright. Let's go again."

They go again, and again, and a few more times for good measure, until they're both just sprawled out on the mat, panting as they stare up at the ceiling. They've been in every position possible at this point, and each of them has won at least once. James now knows what it's like to have Regulus' thighs around his head, and when he'd made the comment that he could now die a happy man, Regulus had *squeezed* as if he was trying to pop his head like a melon. James didn't even try to get out of that one, if he's honest.

People stopped watching the show about halfway in when it became apparent that they weren't actually going to try to kill each other. Some of them even seemed surprised or amused to hear James flirting with Regulus at literally every available opportunity. Irene had asked if she could train with James, and Regulus thankfully shut her down with a simple, sharp *no, find anyone else,* which saved James from finding a way to refuse.

The training room is emptying out now, people leaving and getting ready for personal evaluations. James knows he and Regulus need to get up and leave, but neither of them do for a long moment. They remain on the mat, chests heaving as they lay side-by-side, completely worn out.

Surprisingly, it's Regulus who breaks the silence first. His voice is quiet. "Sometimes, I try to picture putting these skills to use, and it's not—it isn't clear. It won't be like this, James. Not in the arena. We'll be fighting for our lives."

I'll be fighting for yours, James doesn't say. He can't bring himself to say it, and he doesn't know why. Maybe he should. Maybe he should just tell Regulus that he plans to help him get home, but he just—he can't. It won't make Regulus hate him less. James knows it'll make Regulus hate him more.

"I know," is the response James settles for.

"You can't hesitate," Regulus whispers, sounding grave. He pushes himself on his elbow and peers down at James, his throat bobbing. "Not even for a second, not for anyone."

James gazes up at him. "Not even for you?"

"Not even for me," Regulus says softly, and then he gives James a smile. It's small and sad. "But I'm faster."

"Yes, you are," James admits, because he is. "So, as long as you don't hesitate, I won't even get the chance to."

The thing is, James doesn't believe Regulus will kill him, given the chance. It's hard for him to even conceptualize it. He's known Regulus since he was ten years old, just a young boy being carried around on his big brother's back because he wasn't feeling well, asleep on his shoulder. James thought he was younger when he first saw him, because he looked so innocent and small when he was sleeping, a wet spot of drool on Sirius' shoulder under his slack mouth. It had

surprised James to learn he was a year younger—nearly two younger than Sirius. *He's just a baby,* James had thought.

James grew out of thinking that about Regulus, eventually, and Regulus stopped being sweet soon enough. That doesn't mean James doesn't remember. That doesn't mean James doesn't know he's capable of it. Regulus, with his scowls and harsh words, used to smile and stutter and default to kindness as his first instinct. He used to be *shy.* All of those things still exist within him; they just manifest differently now.

James doesn't always have Regulus figured out, not the way he used to, but he knows one thing for sure. Regulus isn't a killer. He *is* a survivor, and he'll do what it takes to survive, but he won't go out of his way to hurt anyone. Especially not James. He can say what he likes, but after all these years, Regulus' eyes are the same, if nothing else, and James needs only look in them to see who he really is.

"Then you won't get the chance to, because I'm not going to hesitate," Regulus tells him quietly, not for the first time, and James just doesn't believe that at all.

Maybe that's a risk, but James looks into Regulus' eyes, and he feels completely, entirely safe.

As if he can sense the source of his weakness, Regulus drops his gaze and pushes himself up all the way, standing to his feet. He could walk away and leave James behind, but he doesn't. He offers his hand, holding it out to him.

James reaches up and takes it.

Chapter End Notes

quick recap:

Bernice and Peter's mentor: Antonin Dolohov
Axus and Willa's mentor: Corban Yaxley
Avery and Mulciber's mentor: Lucius Malfoy
Irene and Mathias' mentor: Frank Longbottom
Evan and Juniper's mentor: Emmeline Vance
Dylan's mentor: unknown
Quinn's mentor: unknown
Vanity's mentor: unknown
Hodge's mentor: unknown
Regulus and James' mentor: *looks into the camera like im on the office*

All other tributes and their mentors: unknown

just putting that information ^ there for your theories, because as of now, that's all you know.

regulus when he was small: im just a baby
james, upon meeting him: he's just a baby!

regulus now: i will cut you
james now: he's just a baby!

we love james being consistent. 😭😭😭

not james and regulus flirting in the middle of preparing to fight to the death. hello???? now is NOT the time, guys. get it together. lmao james really said: YOLO

also we will be seeing more of sirius and remus next chapter. i miss them :(

see you all wednesday!

Evaluation Aftermath

Chapter Notes

hi, again!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-themes and references to death
-very vague references to torture (implied, really)
-an argument
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus knows he shouldn't. He *knows* it's a bad idea, and Sirius would be *furious* if he found out, because he made it very clear from the beginning not to antagonize the gamemakers.

The thing is, when Regulus goes into his evaluation in the afternoon of the last training day, he walks in with a plan. It's a simple plan already approved by Sirius. Go in, show off with various daggers, then leave. Very simple.

He means to do this, and he does for the most part, but…

Well, it's just that Regulus detests this entire experience, even more so when glancing up to see the various people up there watching him intently, laughing and looking excited when he shows them what he's capable of. Just a pawn for them. A character in their show. They don't understand the gravity of his situation; they don't know what's at stake; they don't know what it's like to be afraid, even for a moment.

Regulus wants them to be afraid, to come face-to-face with their own frail existence. Horace Slughorn is the head gamemaker, and he's the one Regulus aims for. It's a quick snap of his wrist, and the dagger flies through the air, burying itself in the cushion right next to Slughorn's head. Regulus aims close enough to slice off one strand of hair that drifts down to his shoulder, but not close enough to actually injure him.

They all fall silent, and Slughorn slowly turns his head to stare at the handle of the knife with wide eyes. He reaches up and pulls the hair off his shoulder, holding it up in visible disbelief, and they're all shaken. Regulus can see that it scared them, and he relishes in it. When they all look at him, he gives a mock bow and walks out with his head held high.

Yeah, Sirius can never know about this.

~•~

"You *threw* a dagger at his *head?!"* Sirius bellows, feeling dangerously close to going fully fucking mental. He raises his arms and waves them wildly. "Have you lost your *mind?!* What were you thinking?! Do you have *any* idea—"

"Can you just—not?" Regulus cuts in wearily, rubbing the side of his head with a sigh. "How did you even find out?"

"Slughorn came complaining to me about it, telling me to keep my tributes in line," Sirius snaps, his nostrils flaring. "You can't just do things like that, Reggie! You don't understand how you put not only yourself but James and also *me* at risk when you act like a selfish, unthinking *child!"*

Regulus glares at him. "That's rich, coming from you."

"This is the Hallow!" Sirius explodes, smacking the back of one hand into his other open palm. "The rules are *different* here. You can't just do whatever you want to whoever you want just because you're feeling a little angry. Breaking news, but we're *all* feeling a little fucking angry! Every move you make, every word you speak, every choice you go with—it reflects on you, and not only you, but on *us.* And that controls just how much fucking danger we're in, do you understand?"

"Well, clearly you're blowing this out of proportion," Regulus snaps defensively, gesturing to the screen. "You saw my score. It was higher than everyone else's."

Sirius could strangle him. He could *actually* strangle his stubborn, innocent little brother. He really could. "That's not a *good thing,* Regulus! That's bad! That's very, *very* bad, you fucking idiot. What do you think that score tells everyone else, hm? What do you think it tells the enemies you've *already made?* Go on." Regulus doesn't answer, choosing to look away, his jaw clenched. "It tells them that you're a threat, and not only that, but you're a bigger one than they realized. It makes them bitter and eager to hunt you down and *slaughter you."*

"They were already planning to do that anyway, and you know it," Regulus grits out.

"Can you just—can you at least fucking *try* to listen to me?" Sirius hisses, his blood pumping, pent up anger and stress and worry leaving him restless and itchy. "I need you to care. I need you to use your fucking brain. I am *responsible* for you, do you realize that? Everything you do, it falls on me as well, and that puts me in danger and makes my job to help *you* survive in that arena just a bit harder, so if you could just—"

"Alright!" Regulus shouts, throwing his hands up as shoves himself up from his seat. "Alright, I get it, just *shut up,* would you? I think you've made your point, Sirius. I can't do anything right for you, I'm not enough like James, I'm a huge fucking disappointment—right, got it, you've only been making that very blatantly obvious for last *decade."*

Regulus whirls around and marches off, and after a long beat, there's the loud slam of his door. Sirius stares after him, passing his hand over his mouth as he exhales harshly through his nose, fighting the lump that's forming in his throat. His eyes sink shut for a brief moment, and then he drops his hand and glances over at Pandora and James, who are both very still and very quiet in their chairs.

"Good talk," Sirius mumbles, heaving a sigh as he shakes his head and turns to move into the kitchen, going primarily for the liquor cabinet that's waiting in there.

"Sirius." That's James, of course, following him and speaking gently. When Sirius glances over at him, James' eyes are sad.

"I—I have to be harder on him, you know that, because he's in so much danger, James. He doesn't even realize—" Sirius chokes off, his head ducking as he stands before shelves of wine and various liquor for him to choose from.

"Sirius," James repeats, even softer this time.

Staring at the drink options is pointless when his vision is blurring with tears. Sirius swallows thickly. "That score was a punishment, and they'll punish him in the games. He's going to get himself killed. He's—he's—"

"Stop. Hey, Sirius, stop," James whispers, moving over to grab him by the shoulder, turning him so that they're looking at each other. "I'm not going to let that happen, alright?"

"You can try, we both can try, but sometimes—" Sirius inhales sharply, the tears spilling out when he blinks. "Sometimes it's not that simple, James. And—and then there's you. Because you're not—because you've decided—"

James cuts him off by pulling him into a tight hug, and Sirius' words fail him from there. He doesn't try to say anything else, unwilling to voice how unfair all of this is, how hard it is, how it's chipping at him and wearing him down until he's feeling like he's falling apart *all the time.* Instead, Sirius buries his face into James' shoulder and tries not to cry too much.

It feels wrong, in a way, to need James to comfort him now, when he's the one going into the arena. Sirius should be the one comforting him, and he knows it. He hasn't really had the time between trying to do everything he can to keep them both alive. How James is handling all of this, Sirius doesn't really know; he doesn't think James would be honest about it either.

James can act like he's settled in his choice all he likes, but Sirius knows it's not as simple as that. People aren't just at peace with their decision to die in a situation such as this. James must be scared, worried, stressed; yet, despite it all, he's the one holding Sirius right now, as steady as a rock.

Sirius pulls away, ashamed, and he shakes his head as he swipes his wrist under his eyes. He turns to compose himself, grabbing the first bottle of amber liquid he comes across and two glasses. The worst part is, Sirius still hasn't faced it, hasn't come to terms with James' choice. He knows James wants him to respect it, but how is Sirius supposed to do that? With his little brother on the other side, it's all so fucking complicated.

Sirius *still* doesn't know how he's supposed to do this, and yet here he is, doing it. Because that's all he can do.

"Regulus didn't mean that, you know," James murmurs as Sirius pours them both a glass.

"Yes, he did," Sirius rasps, sitting the bottle down. "And he's right, isn't he? When I got back from the arena—"

"When you got back from the arena, you were *hurt,* Sirius. You don't need to apologize for how you healed. How you're still healing," James says firmly. "You did nothing wrong by leaving that house and coming to mine."

"I asked him to come," Sirius confesses for the very first time, and James looks surprised. Sirius looks away. "Two years later. Two years too late."

"I asked him the day you moved in," James admits.

Sirius stares down at his drink and whispers, "He needed to hear it from me. He needed me to be the one to ask, and I—I didn't. I didn't until I knew he wouldn't come."

"You didn't until you *could,"* James corrects softly. "Sirius, don't feel guilty for what you went through. You were—you did your very best."

"James," Sirius croaks, "I couldn't even look at him."

To that, James has no reply. Sirius works his jaw, then lifts his drink to knock it back all at once, eyes sinking shut at the burn that flares as it goes down.

The truth is, Sirius couldn't look at Regulus. Couldn't be near him. Couldn't talk to him. Couldn't do anything with him, or for him, because Sirius was a fucking mess. He was broken irreparably, and he didn't know how to handle it.

Sirius couldn't figure out how he was supposed to look his little brother in the eye knowing that Regulus watched him murder in his name. Everything Sirius did—all of it—was so Regulus didn't have to, and that's a lot to put on one person, especially a fifteen year old boy who looked up to him. Sirius returned home *wrong,* and he didn't want Regulus to know, to see it. He's Regulus' older brother, the one who carried him around when he was tired and took care of him when he was sick and volunteered when his name was called.

Sirius didn't want Regulus to see what he'd become, to look at him and remember what he'd done for him. Regulus was the mirror that Sirius was avoiding, too horrified by the reflection of all that he'd done to even come close enough to catch a glimpse.

Regulus couldn't look at him either. Sirius doesn't remember much from that first year when he returned, but he does recall that Regulus was different. Harsher, colder, distant, and defensive. It only got worse as the years went by, and Sirius could only look at him and know he'd done that to him. It was his fault. Sirius went into the arena and fought to get back to his little brother, only to come back and lose him anyway.

Regulus hasn't said it. He has never said it, and Sirius thinks he will die before he ever admits it, but Sirius is sure that Regulus regrets that he ever took his place.

"You're being hard on yourself," James tells him as he swirls his drink in his glass. "You're working yourself spare trying to help Regulus *and* me. Don't think I haven't noticed."

"It's not half difficult, I'll tell you that," Sirius mutters under his breath, reaching out to swipe James' glass from his hand, drinking it if he won't. "Regulus isn't making it *easier."*

James snorts. "Well, it's *Regulus.* You know how he is, and honestly, can you blame him? As if *you* wouldn't like to make the gamemakers shit themselves out of fear." James shakes his head, ducking his head to hide his grin, though Sirius can see it anyway. "That was fucking brilliant."

"James," Sirius scolds lightly, and James gives him a *look.* Sirius tries to keep a straight face, but then he can't help it; a chuckle slips out, and then he's laughing, because it really *is* fucking brilliant. Deep down, Sirius is so proud. He wishes he could have been there to see it, if he's honest.

For a moment, despite everything, they're both just two best friends laughing at the absurdity of Regulus launching a fucking dagger at someone's head. It's so surreal, and they both laugh so hard that they're bent over wheezing, nearly in tears. The acceptable kind of tears this time. James makes everything better; he always has.

"What's worse," Sirius continues, as the laughter fades, "they all think you and Regulus are in some sort of personal battle. They're pitting you against each other, can you believe that?"

"Can't you just tell them we're friends?" James asks.

"Oh, I could, and I've tried, but that's not what they want to hear," Sirius complains. "They want *drama.* They want a story they can get invested in. All the greatest stories have fighting, so of course that's what they want to see."

"I know you're worried," James says, "but what happens will happen regardless. I know you're trying for both of us, and you're doing all that you can, but you have to take care of yourself, too. You—you have to take care of yourself, Sirius." He swallows, looking more solemn as he holds Sirius' gaze. "You have to, do you understand?"

Sirius' lungs seem to shrivel. "James."

"Even when—" James takes a shaky breath, dropping his gaze as he exhales, eyes squeezing shut. "Even when I'm not here to make sure that you do, you have to take care of yourself."

"James, don't. I can't. I—"

"Promise me."

"Stop it," Sirius chokes out, his eyes stinging again. He can't do this. He can't claw himself out of this state of denial. It's a weak, desperate thing to cling to, but he won't accept anything else. He won't do it.

James reaches out to lay his hand on Sirius' arm, chasing Sirius' gaze until he can't evade him anymore. "Please, Sirius. I need you to promise, and I need you to keep it. You have to, alright? I need you to do that for me. Will you do that, please?"

Sirius will do anything for James, but he doesn't know how he's supposed to do this. He doesn't know how he can. Yet, Sirius rasps, "I promise."

The thing is, it's a lie, because Sirius will do anything for James, but he won't be able to do this.

"Thank you," James whispers, none the wiser.

~•~

Regulus isn't in his room when James knocks and tentatively pokes his head in. It's been over an hour now, so James is hoping he's cooled off, even just a bit. The door to his balcony is cracked, a gentle breeze flowing in. James approaches it, then hesitates, then shakes his head and keeps going.

The balcony is wide enough to hold two chairs and a small table between them, a crystal ashtray sitting in the center. James isn't surprised to see that it's empty and clean; Sirius is the one who smokes occasionally, not Regulus. As for Regulus, he's just sitting in the chair with his legs folded

up under him as he peers down at the people walking on the streets, looking like strange, colorful ants from this height.

Regulus doesn't even look up as he sharply says, "What makes you think I want anything to do with *you* right now?"

"Er," James says, and Regulus sighs. There's a long beat of silence before James carefully settles in the open chair, clearing his throat. "Well, better me than anyone else, I'd assume. I mean, I can go get Sirius if you like—"

"I'd rather not be bothered by *anyone,"* Regulus clarifies.

"I just want to check on you," James murmurs.

"I'm fine," Regulus says.

James studies him and quietly asks, "Are you?"

"I have to be," Regulus tells him. "We all do."

"None of us are, and we can't be, not with all of this," James counters, turning his head to watch the people on the street with a small frown. "I don't think trying to force ourselves helps any of us, and pretending to be fine is...pointless."

Regulus doesn't say anything. He just hugs his leg closer to his chest, leaning his chin on his knee. He's had a shower. His hair is damp and curly, and he's changed into soft clothes, like he's ready for bed. He looks sleepy, actually, or maybe just tired. There's a difference; one is adorable and one is sad, and somehow, Regulus manages to be both.

"Sirius—"

"I don't want to talk about Sirius, James. I really don't."

"Right." James releases a quiet sigh, tucking his lips in and ducking his head to stare at his fingers in his lap. He pinches one of his knuckles, then glances back up, scanning the side of Regulus' face. "Do you remember your fifteenth birthday?"

Regulus lifts his head slightly and turns it just to rest his cheek on his knee, looking at James through half-lidded eyes. There's a ghost of a smile on his face, faint and barely there. His voice is so soft when he says, "Yes, I remember."

"It snowed the night before," James recalls, lips tugging up at the corners. "Sirius dragged you all the way to my house in at least five layers and that hat you used to always wear. The lumpy one with the little frayed ball on top."

"Sirius made it for me," Regulus murmurs, his eyes drifting shut. Like this, he looks peaceful. "It used to have a bell in the ball, you know, that way Sirius could hear me coming. He used to say I moved like a ghost, too quiet. That was before you two met. By the time you came into the picture, the bell had stopped ringing. We could never work out why."

"I never knew that," James muses. "That day, your birthday… I remember we spent *hours* outside in the snow. We built that snowman on my front lawn, and you just put your hat on it. You forgot it there when we went off to make snow angels."

"Never did see it again," Regulus says softly.

"Well, you and Sirius had to leave quickly so you wouldn't get in trouble by your parents, and I—" James clears his throat when Regulus' eyes flutter open. "You just—left it, so I took it inside. I meant to give it back to you, but—"

"But, two days later, life as we knew it fell apart," Regulus fills in, huffing out a bitter laugh.

James looks down at his fingers again. "Yeah."

"Suppose it doesn't matter now," Regulus mutters, letting his eyes drift shut again.

"I still have your hat," James confesses. Regulus' eyebrows furrow, but his eyes don't open. "It's—it's, ah, in the top drawer in the stand by my bed."

"James," Regulus says slowly, "it's been ten years."

"Yeah, I know," James mumbles. "But...just in case you ever wanted it back, or...I don't know. It's—that's where it is."

"Why would you do that?" Regulus whispers, eyes finally opening again. "Why would you keep it?"

"It was important to you," James says.

Regulus stares at him for a long time, not saying a word, and there's something unbearably gentle about his eyes right now. James watches them shift from that tenderness to something much more devastating; simple grief. "Sirius told me the day before the reaping that he would make me a new one and put a bell in it for me. I never saw that one either."

James struggles to speak past the lump in his throat and finds that he can't, because it goes so much deeper than just a hat, and he knows that. For Regulus, for Sirius, it's about all that changed for them both. They were so young to have gone through so much. Neither of them deserved it. None of them deserve what they're going through now.

"That sounds stupid, doesn't it?" Regulus asks, dropping his gaze to his own fingers that pluck at the seam on his knee. There's no loose thread, but he's searching for one. "What does a hat matter in all of that, really? It doesn't. It never mattered to me more than him. James, it was never about the hat, or the daggers, or all the things he did for me."

"I know," James rasps, and Regulus closes his eyes again, not speaking for a long time. His fingers drift up and down the scrunched seam where his knee is bent; he couldn't seem to find a thread to pluck on. James focuses back on his fingers, his chest feeling tight. "I remember the snow in your hair."

"What?" Regulus mumbles, one eye cracking open lazily, almost like a cat. No, *exactly* like a cat. A very suspicious cat that wants something but won't tell you what it is.

James coughs and reaches up to scratch at the back of his neck. "Just—on your birthday, I remember the snow that got in your hair. When—just, you know, after you got up from the snow angel you made. You'd already taken your hat off, and there was a bit of snow in your hair, like a

faint dusting of it. I don't know why I—well, I mean, I just remember it."

"Okay," Regulus says, both eyes open now, but not very much. He's just squinting at him, still suspicious.

"I don't know," James mutters, dropping his hand to thread his fingers together. He stares down at them, but his mind seems to rewind, casting back to that day. "You looked—really happy. I think that's the last time I saw you look that happy. I remember right after, I was laughing with Sirius, and a fucking snowball just hit me in the back of my head out of nowhere."

Regulus' face twitches, and there it is—that tiny smile that opens up his eyes a bit more, showing how warm they can be when they're filled with amusement and secret delight. "I wanted your attention."

"You got it," James replies dryly, and Regulus turns his head to press his smile against his knee. James wishes he wouldn't. He wants to see it. "Yeah, you definitely got it."

It's true. James remembers that moment in perfect clarity, because it was an impactful one. Sirius had been chattering about the snow fort they just *had* to build, speaking grandly about how magnificent it would be, and James could only laugh about each ridiculous additional idea he kept coming up with, as well as the silly names he suggested for it.

The thing is, James did hear Regulus call his name the first, second, *and* third time. He just didn't care enough to turn around, much more interested in what Sirius was saying to pay attention to his little brother. Regulus stopped calling his name, and James promptly forgot all about him—for about five seconds. Regulus, who was becoming less and less shy as he got older, launched a snowball at the back of his head so hard that Sirius had shut up mid-sentence and James had just gaped at him in pure disbelief for about two seconds.

Sirius, of course, proceeded to *roar* with laughter, literally folding in half and slapping his knee, a stream of praise for his little shit of a brother falling out of his mouth. Meanwhile, James slowly reached up to brush the clumps of snow out of his hair and pivoted on the spot, fully prepared to threaten Regulus and immediately retaliate by pelting him with snowballs, except he never quite made it that far.

Regulus was standing there with a faint dusting of snow in his dark hair, face flushed with delight, eyes bright with pure satisfaction. He was grinning and wiping his gloves together to get the snow off. It was the first time James had ever looked at him and thought of him as anything other than Sirius' little brother. His breath had caught, because that was the moment he realized Regulus was

utterly, undeniably beautiful.

Regulus had fixed his face into something neutral, despite the bright gleam in his eyes, and he'd arched an eyebrow right at James as he said, "I was talking to you. Don't ignore me."

From there, James never ignored Regulus again.

But, really, nothing was the same after that. Two days later, Sirius was volunteering to go to the arena so Regulus didn't have to, and Regulus… Well, Regulus started ignoring James. He never quite stopped, and it only got worse when Sirius made it back home. Regulus' distance had shifted into hatred at some point, and James just had to live with that.

Sometimes, James wonders what would have happened if Regulus' name had never been called, if Sirius didn't volunteer for him, if the games didn't exist at all. Sometimes, James wonders what would have happened if he and Regulus had bothered to pay attention to each other at the same time. There's no point in wondering, really. He'll never know.

"That was a good day," Regulus murmurs, his face soft with fondness. "The last good day, I think. Before—everything."

"You never did tell me what you wanted," James says, which makes Regulus blink over at him. "I mean, you hit me in the back of the head with a snowball, but you never did say why."

"I just wanted you to look at me," Regulus tells him, then jolts and squeezes his eyes shut. "Wait. Wait, no, I didn't—"

"Oh, is that *so?"* James teases, leaning forward with a grin as Regulus groans and begins repeatedly tapping his forehead to his knee. His cheeks are turning red. "You wanted me to look at you? That was all? So you *hit me* in the back of—"

"I was *fifteen,"* Regulus hisses, head snapping up as he glares at James. "Only just!"

"A very violent fifteen year old. You wanted my attention enough to give me brain damage."

"Oh, *please.* I did not hit you that hard."

"It hurt, Regulus."

"It did not hurt, stop exaggerating."

"Did too."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't have ignored me, then."

James hums and braces his elbows on the table, flicking his gaze over Regulus' face—the fading red in his cheeks, the secret smile at the corners of his mouth, the flash of humor in his eyes. "That was the last time I made that mistake."

"That was the last time I cared if you did or not," Regulus informs him bluntly, fucking *ruthless* about it without even having to try that hard. In a split second, all the delight and humor has drained away, and that secret smile has flickered out of existence like a candle being blown out.

"I know," James says softly, sinking back into his seat and tucking his hands under the table again, twisting them in his lap. He watches Regulus' lips press into a thin line before he looks away to stare at his knee, and James drops his gaze to his restless fingers right after.

The silence stretches between them, heavy and stilted. James doesn't know how to break it, and Regulus clearly doesn't care to, so it remains unbroken. Even here, in the silence, James is overly aware of Regulus. It's been ten years, and James still can't find it within himself to ignore him ever again.

Maybe somewhere deep down, where that happy fifteen year old is still alive, despite everything that's tried to smother it, including the twenty-five year old that he is now—maybe there, Regulus still cares, because he eventually does break the silence to say, "Thank you for keeping my hat."

"You're welcome," James replies quietly, and he doesn't say that Regulus will see it again, but he will. He knows where it is now, and James is going to make sure he gets it back. He'll wear it again when this is all over.

James is so fucking sad that he'll never get to see it.

~•~

Remus stares at the door in front of him, the inside of his bottom lip caught as he worries it between his teeth. It's such a simple thing—just lift his hand and knock. He does it all the time, but never in the last five years has he done it of his own free will, just to show up and seek someone out.

It infuriates him that there's fear mixed up within him for doing one simple thing. He's been trained—conditioned—to *not* do this, and he hates that he's struggling with it now. A self-imposed restraint that he would have snarled at and shook off only five years ago. Now, he can't even knock on a door.

Remus takes a deep breath and slowly releases it, waiting for the anxiety-induced racing of his heart to slow. In and out, he breathes, looking down at his feet. There's trust in this, too, and it's *Sirius*. It's Sirius, who has been nothing but kind to him, who has given more reason to trust him than anyone else ever has in the last five years. Sirius even *told him* he could do this, could come and go as he pleases, so there's no need to restrain himself. The worst that happens is that Sirius turns out to be a liar, and Remus ends up dead. Or worse.

Well, that didn't help at all. Remus squeezes his eyes shut, frustrated beyond measure, and he starts to turn away before he forces himself to stop. In all of this, Remus never wanted to lose himself; he never wanted to let them win. This? This would be letting them win. The fear means they already have.

Clenching his jaw, Remus lifts his hand and holds his breath as he knocks. He only does it twice before he's snatching his hand back, his heart racing, nerves pulled tight enough to snap. He shouldn't be here. He shouldn't—

"Remus," Sirius blurts out as soon as the door swings open, his tired eyes immediately growing wider and filling with a startled spark. His hand fumbles on the doorknob, nearly making him stumble, and he violently clears his throat as he straightens up, a weak smile working onto his face.

And, just like that, Remus isn't scared anymore. It's strange what a sense of identity can do for someone, and Remus feels more real each time Sirius says his name. "Sirius. Hi."

"Hi. Hello. Hi," Sirius says, then huffs out a breathy laugh and scrunches his nose. "I—ah, I said hi twice."

"You did," Remus confirms, lips twitching.

"Right. Sorry. Hi," Sirius tells him, then squeezes his eyes shut, cheeks stained red. "Sorry. That's —um, that's probably the last one. Maybe." He coughs and lifts his head again, a sheepish, mortified half-smile on his face. "Is—did Pandora send you? I didn't request more towels."

"No, she didn't, and no, you didn't," Remus agrees, and Sirius blinks at him. Remus wavers, suddenly unsure how to even explain what he's doing. It's been too long since he's had any social interaction, honestly. He thinks, five years ago, he would have been more discreet, maybe less blunt, but now… Well, now he's a lot more direct. "I came here on my own."

Sirius blinks again, and then his whole face lights up. "Oh. You did? That's—that's great! I mean —" He rocks back on his heels, grinning broadly. "Sure, of course. Not that you can't, you can do whatever you want, but...why? Just—do you need something specific? Can I help you with anything?"

"No," Remus says, then chuckles. "I mean, unless you feel like helping me with laundry, which I doubt, so—"

"No! I mean, yes! I mean, I'd love to. Help. With that," Sirius bursts out, then inhales sharply and stares at him.

Remus struggles so hard not to smile, and then he wonders why he's fighting it. He lets it bloom on his face slowly, feeling it, the freedom of it. "You *want* to help me with laundry?"

"Well, if you're offering…" Sirius reaches up and scratches at the side of his neck, shrugging. "I've the time."

"Alright," Remus says slowly, cocking his head. Not exactly his plan, if he's honest, *but* there's something nice about that, about not knowing where he might end up, going with the flow and seeing the freedom in surprise. "Alright, come with me, then."

The laundry room is located in the back of the suite, never used by anyone but the servants. Sirius

clearly never even knew it was back here, if the baffled expression on his face is anything to go by. Remus wonders what he thought happened when his clothes disappeared and reappeared in his closet, when his towels were taken and replaced. Not much thought often goes into the process when you're not the one doing it, but Remus *is* the one doing it, so it's always agitated him a bit that no one ever even stopped to think about it. Sirius isn't above his own privileges, and that should bother Remus—it does, a bit—but mostly, it just makes him seem more real, too.

What Remus likes best about Sirius is that he isn't afraid to acknowledge these things. The first thing he says is, "I never even thought about laundry, not once. You do it for all of us, don't you? Here?"

"Yes," Remus admits. "I like Regulus the best, if I'm honest. He keeps his dirty clothes in a neat stack for me to find. I don't have to go searching for them, and he doesn't leave them lying all over his floor." At this, Remus shoots Sirius a pointed look, mildly amused when Sirius looks horrified instantly. "James doesn't leave his wet towels on the floor, which is nice. And Pandora… Well, she never has laundry at all. I think she throws her clothes away, or burns them, or...I don't even know."

"She donates them, or recycles the fabric," Sirius explains, huffing a weak laugh. "Pandora is...a gentle soul, really. She was dealt a good hand, being born in the Hallow, and she doesn't waste that, if she can help it. She tries to help the less fortunate as much as possible."

"Not much like a Hallow at all."

"Not really, no. It's what I like best about her."

Remus hums. "She's kind to me. You all are. Well, Regulus is… Actually, I don't think he's ever spoken to me outside of a quiet hello here or there. Meanwhile, James talked to me for almost an hour yesterday about something he'd learned while training. Did you know that some moths and butterflies will drink blood and tears from people? It's called mud-puddling. I didn't know that until James felt the need to tell me."

"Oh, James," Sirius says with palpable fondness, chuckling under his breath as he shakes his head. "Sounds like him."

"I saw you two earlier in the kitchen, you know," Remus confesses as he turns around to face the clothes in a pile on the table. His voice comes out measured with tentative curiosity, unable to help it. "I didn't mean to. I was just walking by. I didn't linger, I promise."

Sirius walks around the other side of the table, watching Remus sort the clothes into separate, smaller piles with a furrow in his brow. "Sorry if we were in your way. You could have come in if you needed to. Um, what are you doing?"

"Sorting the clothes," Remus explains. "Some have to be washed at different temperatures, some can't be dried, and some can't be washed together."

"Oh," Sirius says weakly. He looks very out of his depth as he lifts his gaze to Remus'. "I didn't know that." Again, Remus likes that he just—admits it. "Can I...help?"

"You can separate the white clothes from the rest," Remus says, lips curling up. Sirius looks relieved and immediately starts doing what he's told. Remus likes that, too. "I didn't want to interrupt. You and James, I mean. It looked like an intimate moment. You two seem...close."

"Yeah, we are," Sirius murmurs, smiling softly, and then he blinks before his gaze snaps up. "Oh, you mean—do you think—no, no, no, I swear we're not—we're just best friends. It was intimate, but not *intimate*. Not like—we're not together."

"Okay," Remus replies casually, nodding easily as he keeps sorting through clothes.

"We've never been together," Sirius apparently feels the need to add. "Just best friends. I mean, I've known him since I was eleven years old. He's…" Sirius' face softens into something much sadder. "He's the best friend I've ever had."

Remus feels his heart clench, because he knows that Sirius is in a difficult position right now, between his little brother and best friend going into the arena. Only one can come out, and the chances of that are depressingly low. "I, ah, have one of those. A very special best friend. I get what you mean."

"You do?" Sirius asks, startled and curious, sucked right out of his sadness in a snap. "Here?"

"No. Back home," Remus murmurs, dropping his gaze to the silk slipping over his fingers. He swallows thickly. "Lily. I haven't seen her in five years, but when you're best friends like we are—like you and James are—time and distance doesn't really matter, does it? It goes beyond that."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know what you mean," Sirius croaks, offering a tight, trembling smile. There's a long beat of silence, and then he clears his throat. "Five years. I can't even imagine being without James for that long. You must miss her."

"Very much. Every day with every breath," Remus admits.

Sirius smiles at him, gently. "You can—I mean, if you want to, you can tell me about her."

And Remus does want to, he realizes, because he misses Lily like a permanent ache in his bones, and it's been so long since he's seen her; he's starved, in a way, desperate to take the chance to talk about her. It's like he can keep her closer if he makes her real to someone other than him.

So, Remus tells Sirius about Lily. In between sorting clothes, he tells Sirius how he and Lily met in school, how they became fast friends, how they ate lunch together every day and went to the train tracks after school just to walk up and down them while talking about nothing and everything as the sun sank down below the tree line. He tells Sirius about the red of Lily's hair, the snort in her hardest laughter, the light that entered her green eyes every time she saw Remus coming.

In between starting the first load of clothes—and giving Sirius a brief lesson on how to use the fancy Hallow machine—he talks about how he and Lily went everywhere together and did everything together, so much so that everyone mostly assumed they were dating. He talks about how they thought, because of those assumptions, that they *had to* date, only to realize after a kiss that sent them both into uproarious laughter that their desires leaned *away* from the opposite sex. He talks about how he was there for Lily when her first girlfriend got taken in the reaping and never made it back home. He talks about how Lily punched his first boyfriend in the face because he was caught kissing another boy from their class.

As they go back to sorting the clothes, Remus talks about how close their families were. Lily was always coming over to the Lupin home, and Remus was always at the Evans house. He talks about the long summers, the heat that brought a flush to Lily's round cheeks, the nights they sat out at the train tracks to watch the lightning bugs flicker. He talks about their tradition to get high the night before every reaping, smoking and giggling like they had no worries at all.

Remus doesn't talk about when it went wrong. When it all fell apart. When he and Lily were crossing the train tracks for the very first time, running for their lives and going farther than they ever dared to, blood on their hands and Aurors on their heels. He doesn't talk about how only one of them could get away, and how he made sure it was her.

He doesn't even breathe a word about the fact that he doesn't know if she managed to or not, if

she's dead or alive, and if she did escape, where she is now.

Because he doesn't mention these things, Sirius essentially shatters his heart by tentatively saying, "I—well, you know I have to be there on the tour back through the districts, so if you wanted to write her a letter, or just send a message, I don't think it would be impossible for me to get it to her."

"Thank you," Remus says softly, swallowing down the lump in his throat, "but it would be impossible. I—I appreciate the offer, though, really. You're very kind, Sirius."

"Alright," Sirius murmurs, eyebrows furrowed. "If you change your mind, the offer is always open."

Remus gives him a tight smile and turns away to put the first load onto dry, then turns back and clears his throat. "The rest of this is really tedious, and there's nothing more that you could do to really help me, so you don't have to stay. Thank you for all your help, but I have it from here."

"I didn't really do anything," Sirius says.

"You listened," Remus tells him. "That's more than anyone else in the Hallow has ever done. I just…"

Sirius scans his face, then he takes a deep breath before slowly releasing it. "Remus, you don't need an excuse to tell me to go away. If—if you want to be alone, you can just tell me you don't want my company. It's alright. I'm not going to… I said you can do whatever you want, and that can include telling me to piss off. You don't have to hold back with me, alright?"

Having it put to him so bluntly makes him realize that this is a fear, too. A faint, flickering fear in the back of his mind that this newfound freedom Sirius has granted him could be taken away if Remus upset him in some way. It's such a small concern that he didn't even notice it, because he doesn't really believe it; doesn't really think Sirius would make something like this conditional. He's so *earnest,* and Remus can feel his trust in Sirius growing stronger with every interaction.

That doesn't mean it's easy. That doesn't mean Remus isn't unconsciously being careful, having doubts, clinging to restraint he's had rewired into his brain after five years. It's like a leap of faith, pushing boundaries even when Sirius tells him that he can. This is bigger than a knock on a door, and yet, with Sirius right there, he's not as afraid as he should be.

"I—I'd like for you to leave," Remus says, and immediately, his heart jolts and takes off in his chest, his stomach dropping right out from under him.

"Alright," is Sirius' quiet response, a tiny smile flickering across his face, and then he pulls back and starts to leave.

"Sirius!" Remus blurts out, a little breathless, and Sirius pauses to glance back, blinking and waiting. It's strange. Remus wants to shrug back into freedom like a familiar, beloved coat, but less so when it involves freedom from Sirius. It's not that Remus forgot that he wanted things; it's that he forgot he was allowed to. He's relearning to navigate that, and he wants to do it with Sirius. "I just—I only want a bit of time. I'm—I still have to make dinner when I finish with the laundry, so if you wanted, you could—I mean, you could help with that, too."

"You don't have to do that, Remus," Sirius says.

"No, I know," Remus breathes out. "I *know,* Sirius."

Sirius bites his lip. "You know I'm not going to be much help in the kitchen."

"Well, that's the thing," Remus tells him, huffing out a soft laugh, "it's your company I really want."

"If you're sure," Sirius says, holding his gaze, his lips twitching at the corners like he's struggling not to grin.

"I'm *very* sure," Remus replies.

"Well, alright," Sirius muses, tucking his lips in, eyes bright. He nods and clears his throat. "I'll just…go make sure I don't have any clothes strewn all over my floor."

Remus looks down with a smile. "Much appreciated. I'll see you in the kitchen in an hour, then?"

"Yeah. Yes. I will—yeah," Sirius answers, stumbling over his words as he backs up. He turns and knocks directly into the door. "Shit." He glances back at Remus, and then he drags his hand down his face as he hangs his head, cheeks red. He opens the door with a cough. "Right. Bye. I mean, see you soon. In the—okay. Bye."

Remus moves over as Sirius ducks out and starts up the hallway, berating himself under his breath as he goes. Remus slowly shuts the door and presses his forehead against it, a small smile curving his mouth. Sirius—more so than anything else he's ever encountered—is Remus' favorite mess. Nothing or no one could ever compare.

Despite that, Remus is glad that he left. Glad that he *would* leave, all because Remus gathered the courage to ask, all because Remus needed him to. Because, right now, Remus really needs to be alone.

He turns and puts his back to the door, slowly sliding down the length of it until he lands on the floor, his knees bent in front of him. His smile is long gone as he stares at the machine that whirs quietly with the clothes of people who don't even bother to think about who washes them. He can't really see it through the blur of tears in his eyes, because at this moment, the only person he wants to be with is Lily, and he will never get to see her again. He doesn't even know if she's alive.

For the first time in five years, Remus is granted the freedom to sit down and cry about that.

Chapter End Notes

i have been encouraged to ramble at will in my end notes, so ill do it when the mood strikes.

first of all, regulus being a defiant little shit will never not be funny to me, but also, the butterfly effect is real, and regulus just caused a wing flutter.

also, sirius is going THROUGH it. this poor guy is just being pushed to rip all his hair out, like james and regulus are trying to give him a heart attack, at this point. and the complicated relationship between regulus and sirius makes me so sad. it's so, so complex, and honestly, despite the angst of it, it's actually really interesting to navigate and explore. there is no pain like the pain between them, in my opinion. like, that always hurts me the worst.

and sirius being in denial about james deciding to die. he really said: this sign can't stop me, because i REFUSE to read it. same, sirius. i also do not accept any version of james potter's death. that's valid, king!

but then!!! james and regulus talking!!! the hat!!! the snowball to the back of james' head!!! they're so cute, and at the same time, they're so fucking tragic. james being sad

that he'll never see regulus wear the hat again :(

and THEN!!! remus and sirius. i find it absolutely hilarious that they're essentially falling in love in the middle of being very domestic. like, they're cooking and doing laundry together. yes, that's a recurring theme for them. i didn't plan that, honestly. it just kept happening. but it makes me giggle because like, oh there's this big horrible event (the hunger games) about to take place and it's freaking everyone out. cut to sirius and remus flirting while doing laundry 😭

and finally, LILY!!! LILY LILY LILY!!! oh, you all have NO IDEA how excited i was for that mention of her. but also, remus crying because his best friend is possibly dead ☹☹☹ oh, that's so sad. their backstory is... well, it's a doozy, lemme just say that.

anyway, hope you all enjoyed! see you on saturday! :)

Interview Preparation

Chapter Notes

hello, happy saturday everyone!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-an overall background theme of death (because of the whole "possibly dying in an arena" thing)
-references to murder (not explicit, just mentioned)
-references to child abuse (vague, but obvious, yes it's Walburga and Orion's A+ parenting again)
-more references and descriptions of Sirius being objectified by the Hallows
-violent thoughts
-angst

but hey, you've also got plenty of flirting! and some humor, so that's nice. also some jealousy, for spice! enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius wakes up to a knock on his door, and he can tell it's early because he has to fight the desire to groan and shove his head underneath his pillow to hide away from whoever is trying to drag him to the land of the living before it's time. His sweet oblivion; he misses it already. He can almost feel himself sinking right back into it, eyes drifting shut again as—

Knock, knock, knock.

Muffling a growl under his breath, Sirius tumbles out of bed with one eye squinting as he snarls, "What the fuck do you *want?* It's too fucking early to be—"

Sirius promptly swallows the rest of his words when he opens his door to find Remus standing on the other side, a mild expression on his face. Sirius tries to fix his face into something that's not just squinting at him with one eye like a deranged lunatic.

"Remus, hi," Sirius greets weakly, regretting the last five seconds more than he's regretted anything in his *life,* and he's actually murdered people.

"Good morning, Sirius," Remus says calmly. "Pandora asked that I would wake you up, as you apparently requested an early start to the day."

Sirius grimaces. "Yeah, well, Sirius of the past is a prick, and I don't like him." This makes Remus' lips twitch, but his expression remains fairly neutral otherwise. "Sorry about—you didn't have to do that. You're not an alarm clock. You could have told her no."

"I didn't mind," Remus murmurs. "It got me out of making breakfast. Pandora said everyone knew how to use the toaster, and the day would be so busy that a big breakfast would just hold up the schedule."

"It's—yeah, it's going to be a busy day," Sirius admits wearily, heaving a sigh as he runs his hand through his hair. It's likely sticking up in all different directions, but he tries not to focus on the fact that Remus can see it. "We have to get James and Regulus ready for their interviews tomorrow. It's—well, if I'm completely honest with you, it's going to be difficult."

"Regulus?" Remus asks, because he's spent four days around him by now, and that's all it really takes to know that Regulus isn't the best conversationalist.

"Regulus," Sirius confirms with a sigh.

Remus hums. "I don't suspect James will be much of a problem."

"No, I think his interview will cause the least drama, honestly," Sirius admits. "Regulus… Well, my hopes aren't high, if I'm honest, and we had a fight yesterday, so… And then they have to go be fitted for their outfits with their stylist team while *I* have to go to a fucking party and smooze at sponsors."

"I have to work that party," Remus tells him.

Sirius blinks. "Oh. So, you'll be there?"

"Yes," Remus says. He pauses, slowly lifting his eyebrows at him. "You—you can't talk to me, Sirius. Or remove my mask. Or have anything to do with me there, really. I mean, I'm sure you know that, but...just a reminder."

"Right, no, I know," Sirius replies quickly, despite the fact that his brain was already coming up

with increasingly ridiculous scenarios involving literally all of those things. But that's not how it works in the Hallow. He does that, and Remus would be killed. "But, well, I can look at you."

"You...can," Remus agrees, lips curling up. "I suppose that's not a crime."

"That'll be enough to improve my night," Sirius admits, because it's true, and he's so pleased he said it when Remus' smile grows.

Remus hums and looks away, his side profile still giving away the smile on his face. He can't hide it at all. "Right, well, I suppose I should leave you to...starting your day."

"Do you want to come in?" Sirius blurts out.

"Aren't you going to shower and get dressed?" Remus asks, looking at him again with his eyebrows flying up.

Sirius thinks it's unfair that the floor won't open up and swallow him on the spot like he's desperately internally begging it to. "Ah, yeah, but—I mean, you could help me pick out what to wear tonight. So you'll recognize me."

"Sirius, I think you could be in a plastic bag, and I would still recognize you," Remus tells him, amused.

"I'd wear a plastic bag if you told me to," Sirius replies, and he would. He absolutely fucking would.

Remus starts laughing; full, genuine laughter that shakes his body and makes his eyes sparkle and brings a flush of life to his cheeks. He lifts his hand like he's about to cover his mouth to hide it, or smother it, and Sirius' hand snaps out to catch his arm. He pushes it down gently, and Remus' laughter fades slowly, leaving behind a smile and something that shifts in his eyes. Sirius pulls his hand back, his stomach all topsy-turvy and his heart thumping hard in his chest.

Maybe Sirius shouldn't have done that. He's never—he hasn't touched Remus since trying to remove his mask, careful not to do it without permission. In a way, stopping Remus from covering his mouth was—wrong, and presumptuous. He should have let Remus do it, if that's what he wanted to do; he just wasn't thinking, because he liked it, to see his smile and hear his laugh, and

Sirius didn't think Remus should feel like he had to cover that at all.

"Sorry," Sirius murmurs. "I wasn't—I shouldn't have—"

"You don't have to hold back with me either, you know," Remus replies quietly, his face softening. "Really, you're fine. Come on, let's pick something for you to wear."

"Not a plastic bag?" Sirius jokes as he turns to let Remus inside, his heart jumping as Remus slips past and very gently, very briefly slides the tips of his fingers over Sirius' arm as he goes by. Sirius swears it makes his whole body tingle; even his scalp is prickling in the aftermath of the barely-there touch.

Remus glances back with a tiny smile. "No promises."

~•~

James is not at all gratified by the tension that exists between Sirius and Regulus right now. It's putting him on edge, if he's honest, because they need to sort their shit out before the games—which starts in *three fucking days,* including this one.

The thing is, James has accepted that he's going to die. Is he happy about it? Well, obviously not. He isn't happy that he'll never see his parents again, that he'll never get to go home again, that he won't get to stay with Sirius, who will need him, who will get older while he can't. No, of course James isn't fucking pleased that he's in this situation, but he's accepted it nonetheless, because this is his choice. The alternative—he can't do that. He *won't* do that.

So, in a way, it feels like a slap to the face that Sirius and Regulus are essentially wasting this time they could spend getting on better terms by remaining stilted and distant. James knows that it's complicated, that they can't just overcome a decade of issues in a handful of days, especially under the very stressful constraints they all exist within now; that being said, he still wishes that they would just—be okay again.

James is annoyed with Regulus, because Sirius is going to need him; James is annoyed with Sirius, because Regulus already does. They love each other *so much,* even more than the other realizes, and if they could just accept that, and *show* that, then things would be better for them. They're both so stubborn, so resistant, and it's driving James mad.

But, because James is always willing to find the bright side to any situation, he can admit that, while all of this is fucking awful, it does nonetheless force Regulus and Sirius to actually interact with each other. Hey, it's something. He'll take it.

Sirius is pacing back and forth, clearly weighing his words very carefully, so at least he's making an effort. The same can't be said for Regulus, who is slumped down in his chair, arms crossed with a scowl etched onto his face. James doesn't think it's fair for someone to look good when they're making such a sour expression, but that's Regulus for you.

"Rita Skeeter," Sirius starts, and Pandora makes a low sound of disdain, which causes Regulus' lips to twitch. James' does as well, frankly, because it hasn't taken very long to grow fond of her. Even Regulus is giving into it, at this point. "She's been doing interviews and commentary for four years now. She's settled in and made a name for herself, beloved by many Hallows, and she knows what she's doing."

"Not *all* Hallows," Pandora grumbles, and James has to stifle a chuckle at the derision in her tone.

Sirius coughs around a laugh. "Ah, originally, Pandora tried to go for the same job, but Rita…"

"Is a vapid, morally corrupt *snake* who will do anything and *anyone* to get what she wants," Pandora snaps, and Regulus' eyebrows fly up, visibly impressed by the poison in her words. He glances over at James, and as soon as their eyes meet, they both quickly look away so they won't bust out laughing. Meanwhile, Pandora huffs. *"Some of us* have standards. I wasn't about to lower those standards or stoop to the level required to get that job. It's an ugly, horrid position, you know. I wanted to go in with *sympathy,* with genuine sincerity to the tributes we meet and lose, but *no,* it's all about the drama. Tch."

"Right, yes, you have *our* sympathy, Pandora," Sirius tells her, seeming to honestly mean it. That softens Pandora quite a bit, and James is once again startled to find that Sirius actually has people he cares about in the Hallow; fellow mentors, a Hallow here and there, and most definitely Pandora. "You certainly would have been the better choice, no doubt, but I'm selfishly grateful to have you to myself anyway. We *all* are, aren't we?"

"Oh, yeah, certainly," James confirms supportively.

"It doesn't make much of a difference to m—ow!" Regulus' scowl deepens as Sirius walks by and whacks him on the back of his head. Sirius gives him a rather stern look, and Regulus rolls his eyes. "Yes, Pandora, we're very grateful for all that you do for us. You're appreciated."

Pandora looks much happier now. "Thank you. If I'm honest, I'm much happier where I am anyway. Carry on, Sirius."

"So, as Pandora so helpfully described, Rita is not a good person," Sirius announces as he continues to pace. "She doesn't give a toss about you. What she cares about is *drama.* She thrives on a story, a scandal, any secret she can find. I've watched her ruin men twice her size during interviews and take them from having countless sponsors to having none."

"She can really do that?" James asks warily.

"She can, and she *will,"* Sirius warns. "If she detects even a hint of weakness, she will absolutely pounce. If there's *anything* for her to uncover, then she will dig it out by the root."

James swallows. "By anything, you mean…?"

"Secrets. Lies. Drama. *Anything* the Hallows will go mental over," Sirius explains. "In your case, James, you're fine. You don't have anything to hide, and there won't be very much drama surrounding you."

"Are—are you sure about that?" James says, high-pitched.

Sirius waves him off lazily. "Quite sure. At most, she'll try to follow the thread on thinking you hate Regulus, but you won't be lying when you tell her that you don't. She'll no doubt ask if you two are squabbling, and she'll drag me into it, but *you're* not the complicated part of that equation."

"That would be me, I'm assuming," Regulus says flatly. He heaves a sigh. "Why does it always come back to me?"

"Because you're a Black, and our family is cursed," Sirius replies, and Regulus snorts weakly, tossing his hands up in some form of agreement. "But yes, it's going to come down to you. Regulus, listen to me, if she catches even a *hint* of a whiff that you have complex feelings for me, she will *pick them apart.* Do you understand what I'm telling you? If you let slip that we're not—that things are more complicated than it seems, she will chip away until there's nothing left, then lay it out for everyone to see. And I do mean *everyone."*

Regulus stares at him, suitably uncomfortable. In a rare show of vulnerability, he whispers, "Sirius, I don't—I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to talk to people. I'm not like you. I can't—I don't know how to be—"

"Regulus," Pandora cuts in gently, "that's why we're here. We're going to help you, alright? You'll be prepared for anything that vile twit could think to throw at you."

"Look at me," Sirius says quietly, crouching down beside Regulus' chair to hold Regulus' gaze. "You can't—you can't shut down, Reggie. When you're up there, you can't retreat into yourself and hide. I know you'll want to, but you need to present yourself in a way that makes them love you. I *know* you hate that, and I get it—I really do—but your survival depends on it. You just have to make it through, alright?"

"I don't know how to make people love me," Regulus replies softly, and that might be the singularly most heartbreaking thing James has ever heard in his fucking life. Oh, that pierces right through the heart, that does.

Sirius' throat bobs, and he squeezes his eyes shut, exhaling slowly. When he opens his eyes, he murmurs, "You don't have to *make* people love you."

"You just said—"

"I—I know what I just said, but I'm not talking about that anymore. I'm not talking about the Hallows. I'm—I mean, in life, Regulus. You don't have to make people love you; they just do. The ones who do—they *do,* just because you're you."

"No one—" Regulus halts, his mouth snapping shut, and just like that, his expression shutters. He *visibly* shuts down, then looks away. James feels his heart sink, because he knows where that ends; they all do; it was fucking obvious where that was going. *No one loves me.*

Sirius looks stricken, and then—because he's a Black, too, and just as complicated as Regulus, if not more—his face goes blank as well. He pushes himself up, pacing away again as he shoves his hands through his hair, gaze distant and cloudy. James feels like his insides are wilting, because that's the perfect opening for Sirius to tell him, except Sirius can't, or won't, because he's too locked in his own head.

James could say it. *You're loved,* he could say. *Sirius loves you,* he could say. There's a lot he could say, but the worst thing about knowing what needs to be said is knowing that he's not the one who needs to say it. Regulus doesn't want to hear it from him, not any version James could throw at him, and he won't believe him. Frankly, James doesn't think Regulus wants to hear it from Sirius either. In a way, that just makes things so much harder for them both.

"Do you remember when we used to play the redirect game?" Sirius asks abruptly, whirling around to face Regulus.

Regulus slowly turns to frown at him. "Yes?"

"The redirect game?" Pandora asks curiously.

Sirius chuckles, and even Regulus quirks a small, sardonic smile, like they're sharing an inside joke that's both funny and not funny at all. "It's this game we used to play when we were children, sort of to prepare ourselves to try to avoid any punishments from our parents. It was like—practice, I suppose. It didn't always work, but sometimes it did."

"It was for when we'd done something wrong. When we broke something, or came home late, or said something we shouldn't have," Regulus explains. "Sirius' method was to be as erratic as possible. He broke a vase once, and when Mother started to punish him, he rambled for—I'm not joking—an hour about various gossip he heard around the district, in hopes that something else would infuriate her more. It actually worked that time. He just got sent to his room."

"One of my luckier moments," Sirius says wryly. "Now, Regulus' method was to be their innocent little angel who never did anything wrong. Oh, that broken window? No, Mother, of course your precious baby boy didn't launch a ball through it. Your baby boy was bringing the ball inside when he tripped and fell, and the ball went flying, and he wanted to pick up the glass, but what if he got hurt? Mother, your baby is so sorry, he'll go pick up the glass now. What's that? You don't want your darling little angel to cut his fingers? Just be more careful next time? *Of course,* Mother. Of course."

Regulus' lips curl up into a smirk. "I still can't believe she bought that one, actually."

"He won the redirect game more than I did," Sirius declares, shaking his head.

"Someone's bitter," Regulus comments. "I can't help it that I was good at it."

"It's all in the eyes with you," Sirius mutters. He points at Regulus and raises his eyebrows at James and Pandora. "He can cry on command, you know. Just bring tears to his eyes in *seconds,* and it's all fake. I've seen it. Fucking mental, he is."

"Wait, can you actually?" Pandora gasps, leaning forward.

"Yes," Regulus admits with a shrug.

Sirius makes a face. "That is *not* normal, Reg."

"Do it," Pandora insists, looking enthralled.

"What, right now?" Regulus asks, eyebrows furrowing.

"I vote no," James cuts in. "Let's keep the tears to a minimum, yeah? Fake or not."

Regulus huffs a laugh. "That stopped working on Sirius by the time I was eight anyway."

"You know when it's real," is all Sirius says. He shrugs when James stares at him incredulously. "Trust me, the real thing isn't that calm. He gets all shaky and struggles to breathe when he's properly crying."

"Yes, well, you're ugly when you cry, so," Regulus grumbles, and he scoffs when Sirius flips him off.

"That sounds brilliant," Pandora announces brightly. "Do it."

"No," James says sharply. "Can we just—is there a point to all of this? Are you telling me that you want him to fake cry during his interview, Sirius?"

"No, I don't think taking it *that* far would do much good, especially not in the arena." Sirius crosses

his arms and goes back to pacing, eyes narrowed in thought as he traces his lips with his finger. "The problem is, this is really just a balancing act, and a *very* important one. Think of it like spinning plates, and you do *not* want to drop even one of them, because that will surely bring the rest down as well."

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "I'm good at balancing things."

"Yes, I know. James is the clumsy one." Sirius purses his lips, then claps his hands together. "Alright, so you've got three plates, yeah? One is threat level, dealing primarily on how your enemies in the arena see you. To start, you balanced that one quite well, but you've likely fumbled it with that act you pulled that got you a high score. They're wary of you, Regulus, which is good. What's *not* good is that they're eager to get rid of you as soon as possible. So, that's one plate down, *but* it's not a broken plate. You didn't shatter it. You're good with daggers, you can fight, and you can run. You're smart enough to outwit those brainless idiots."

"Alright," Regulus says slowly, sounding cautious, clearly not expecting Sirius to brush off the source of their last fight.

"The second plate is political damage," Sirius continues, heaving a sigh as he crosses his arms. "This one is about the gamemakers and government officials, particularly their opinion of you. If you're a favorite, or if you're boring to them, or if you've caused trouble and peeved them off—which you have, by giving Slughorn an impromptu haircut."

"I just took a little off the side," Regulus protests. "Sirius, honestly, you can't even tell! And I could have killed him, you know, but I *didn't.* That's something!"

Sirius covers his whole face with his hand, and then, miraculously, he laughs. He's *still* laughing when he manages to choke out, "Do you—do you realize that you sound like *me?"*

"I do not," Regulus argues instantly, rearing back in offense, like he can't think of anything more insulting.

"Reggie, that's *absolutely* something I would have done, and you're defending yourself by pointing out how much worse you could have been, which is *exactly* what I do," Sirius informs him, dropping his hand.

"No," Regulus denies, shaking his head. "No, absolutely not." He looks at James, who scrunches

his face and tips his head from side-to-side. Regulus looks appalled. "No. I *refuse* to—no, James. That—that wasn't a *Sirius* move."

"It was a Sirius move, yeah," James confirms.

"Well, if—if that's true, which it *isn't,"* Regulus stresses, and it looks like his eye actually twitches, "then why were you so fucking angry, Sirius?"

"Because it's not *my* life on the line," Sirius tells him, raising his eyebrows. "It's yours. It's James'. You did something incredibly reckless, and if it wasn't for the fact that it increases your chances of being killed, I *wouldn't* have been angry. But it does, and I can't believe I have to say this to*you* of all people, but you have to be more careful."

"I thought it was brave," Pandora comments.

Regulus looks stricken. "Oh, it *was* a Sirius move. Why did I do that? Why would I *ever—"*

"Well, for you, I imagine it comes from a place of pettiness, because you're a raging bitch," Sirius says casually.

"And what's *your* excuse?" Regulus shoots back.

Sirius grins at him. "The same, really, but I'm just louder about it. You couldn't have picked a worse moment to increase your volume. Tone it down, would you?"

"Oh, fuck off," Regulus mutters, but something about his tone or body language must read as compliant, because Sirius looks satisfied as he nods. "So, political damage plate down, too?"

"Well, it's certainly falling, which is not good," Sirius tells him with a wince. "These people control your experience in the arena, *particularly* Horace Slughorn. They're the ones who can blink a stream out of existence just as you're dying of dehydration, or send a fucking fireball at your head when you're sleeping. Some things in the arena are set in stone, like the layout and original design, but they can control other things as well. They can't outright *kill* you, as that wouldn't make for a good show, really, which is the most important part to them—but they can, however, influence how easy or how hard things are for you. If you've peeved them off, well, you can assume that it's not going to be easy."

"Lovely," Regulus says, eyes sinking shut. "One plate down, and another heading for the floor. Just lovely."

James fidgets restlessly with his hands in his lap. He doesn't like this at all. It's sounding more and more like it's going to be very fucking hard to keep Regulus alive and get him home. Whether it's simple, or the most grueling thing James will ever go through, he's still going to do it regardless, but he's not ashamed to admit that he wishes it wasn't *that* difficult.

"And the last plate?" James prompts warily, because at this point, he isn't expecting good news.

"Public image," Sirius announces. Regulus scoffs as his eyes snap open, and Sirius points at him. "No, don't do that. Don't make that face and be so quick to dismiss it. Public image is more important that you realize; I don't know how many times I have to tell you. Believe it or not, it's the *most* important."

"It is," Pandora confirms. She leans forward with a heavy sigh, threading her hands together. "Who do you think this is all for, really? I mean, *really* think about it."

Sirius nods. "The people—the Hallows, primarily—have more power than you'd think. The tributes they care about, the ones they want to see, *those* are the tributes that make it far. Not just because sponsors empty their pockets; it's also about public opinion. If they have a high opinion of you, they want to see you live, and fight, and even *win.* The games...they're never really just left up to chance, or fate. There's an unfair advantage for those that come in with skills, and there's an unfair advantage for those that endear themselves to the public. You *want* those advantages, and it can't matter that they're not fair, because it might just be the thing that stands between you and death. Very, *very* rarely does anyone go into the games with no skills and no support and come out alive. It can happen, but it almost never does, and do not make the mistake of thinking that it will for you. Chances are, it won't."

"But it has happened?" Regulus asks, sounding genuinely curious. "I mean, you say it can, but *has* it?"

"Only once that I've ever seen," Sirius murmurs. "My friend, Marlene. She had virtually no sponsors, and she hadn't ever practiced with a weapon before the training center."

"She won," James says softly. "How?"

"She fought when she needed to. She hid well. She surprised everyone, because no one expected her to live past the first day, let alone be the last standing. Not even me," Sirius admits.

Regulus is quiet for a long moment, taking that in, and then he heaves a sigh. "So, I'm guessing my public image plate is absolutely shattered on the floor, then?"

"Actually, no," Sirius corrects. "It's still up and spinning, but it's a bit wobbly. Fortunately, you haven't had to appear in public much just yet. This interview is going to decide whether or not that plate falls, and Regulus? You *need* to not let it fall, do you understand? If you keep it up, the other two can be picked up, too. But if it falls, all plates are down, and your odds in the arena… Well, it's not good. Not good at all."

"The problem is, I don't know how to keep it from falling, Sirius," Regulus grits out.

"I know that, which is why I brought up the redirect game. You're going to play it," Sirius tells him firmly. "You're going to be the Hallows' angel trying to avoid trouble. That's all it is. You can do that; you've done it all your life."

"So, I'm supposed to—lie," Regulus says.

Pandora busts out laughing, smacking her thigh. They stare at her until she calms, and she shakes her head, amused. "Oh, you're *absolutely* going to lie, Regulus. Everyone is going to be lying when they talk to Rita. She is *not* the type of person you want to trust with the truth."

James feels a jolt of nerves shoot through him, because he's not a good liar, especially when he's anxious. He starts to bring this to everyone's attention, but Sirius and Pandora lean forward and launch into coaching Regulus on how to survive his interview. James falls silent, but he can't help but think that he might need some coaching, too.

Well, maybe it'll be fine.

~•~

Regulus doesn't want to admit it, but he's come to reluctantly like Gideon as a person, despite the

fact that he's a Hallow. It's much the same as with Pandora and Dorcas. Being forced to spend time with them has shown him that they're more than he ever expected them to be. Not many Hallows are.

"No, not like that," Gideon says with a sigh, reaching out to smack Regulus' hands away from the clasp at his throat. He looks unbothered by the glare Regulus pins on him. He even rolls his eyes. "Oh, stop it, I'm trying to *help* you. What are you going to do? Attempt to bite me again?"

"Don't tempt me," Regulus mutters.

"Believe it or not, this is a collaborative effort," Gideon tells him, looking amused. "We're all here to make you look your best, so you can survive your best."

"The day we met, you told me I was the nicest doll you'd ever had," Regulus says flatly.

Gideon chuckles. "Yes, well, don't fault me for appreciating potential when I see it. You, my friend, have what one would call timeless, natural beauty." He leans in and lowers his voice to a whisper. "That's a weapon too, if you use it right."

"Well, the goal is to get the Hallows to love me, so...I suppose being pretty can't hurt," Regulus replies with a grimace, a deep sigh escaping him. He can't help the nerves that jumble up under his skin just thinking about the interview.

"Hey," Gideon murmurs, his voice softening as he braces his hands on Regulus' shoulders. "You're going to do fine. And this, what we've given you? It's a tool, Regulus, and you can use it. We're going to be in the crowd, you know. So, if you need a familiar face, look for me, Fabian, and Dorcas."

Really, if Regulus wants anyone to be there, just for reassurance, it's Sirius. He won't be, because he'll be in the back before and after each interview. Still, it's actually sort of nice that Gideon offers. "Thank you."

"Not too tight?" Gideon asks as he gently tugs on the cloak resting over Regulus' shoulders.

"No, it's—it's fine."

"You're comfortable? Don't feel like you're being strangled?"

"No."

Gideon nods and pulls his hands back. "Excellent. Might I say, Regulus, you look downright *fetching."*

"Yay," Regulus mumbles, and Gideon snorts. "I know that this is basically your livelihood, but it's just not...my thing."

"Yeah, I figured that out on my own," Gideon muses, lips twitching. "You know, Fabian and I… Fashion was one of the things that always really gave us independence. We've expressed ourselves differently since we were children, and this actually gave us a sense of independence that—well, I'd say it really empowered us both. We needed it. Something that kept us separate, but it also brought us together as well. When you're brothers, something like that is sacred."

Something that kept us separate, but it also brought us together as well. When you're brothers, something like that is sacred. Regulus thinks of him and Sirius, and then, rather ridiculously, what passes through Regulus' mind is one word. A name. *James.*

He swallows thickly and drops his gaze, running his fingers over the cloak that slips down past his fingers. It's dark and soft, only just sweeping along the floor.

"Come on," Gideon says, stepping back, "let's get you to Dorcas so she can explain everything."

Regulus follows him out and isn't surprised to find James and Fabian chatting easily. James is cracking up, laughing at something Fabian is saying, and he looks unfairly good in the outfit designed for him. It's not much different from Regulus' own, except there's no choker around his throat shaped like a crown. Instead his crown has been broken in half and placed on each shoulder, holding his cloak up. It's similar to Regulus', except it's white, and it looks more like a cape for a set of armor than an actual cloak. It drapes mostly from his back, making him look like some form of royalty.

"Oh, well don't you look nice?" James comments when he sees Regulus, a smile spreading across his face immediately. He's been shaved recently, a close and clean shave that makes his face look smooth. Regulus has admittedly appreciated his stubble before, so this is...new.

"Are they ever going to give you your glasses back?" is all Regulus can bring himself to say in response.

"I asked the same thing," James admits, clearly vindicated. He shoots Fabian a look that quite blatantly says *see?* Fabian just rolls his eyes, and James looks at Regulus again. "Did they, er, fluff your curls? They look—fluffy."

"Yeah, that'd be called *volume,* darling," Fabian says, amused, and James huffs. "But yes, Gideon has obviously tousled them for him. The goal here is to make him look angelic, and I'd say he looks as near to a cherub as one can get. Nicely done, Gid."

"Thank you, thank you," Gideon replies grandly, dipping down into a bow with a pleased grin.

Regulus scoffs. "Oh, come off it. I do *not* look—"

"No, you do," James cuts in, then coughs when Regulus stares at him, startled. "I just—I mean, you look...sweet. Because of Gideon. What he did, I mean. You look—yeah."

Fabian snorts, then disguises it as loudly clearing his throat, suddenly finding the ceiling utterly fascinating. Meanwhile, Gideon starts to smile, only to tuck his lips in and look down at his shoes like he's never seen them before. James, on the other hand, looks like a spooked deer.

"Sweet?" Regulus asks skeptically.

"Yeah, like...young," James says slowly, then starts rambling instantly. "Not—no, I don't mean that you look really young, because obviously you're not. Just—well, I'm not saying you're old. We're the same age, is all. And it's—I don't see you as, you know, younger or innocent or—or anything like that, just because you're Sirius' baby brother. Well, not baby. Little. Younger. I mean—"

"Pretty," Dorcas fills in as she comes sweeping into the room, her lips curled up. "He thinks you're pretty."

"Oh, I'm so glad you've arrived," Gideon breathes out.

"Yeah, that was painful," Fabian says, and James elbows him sharply in his side, which just makes him stifle a laugh.

"Yes, well, James is right. You're very pretty. Both of you are. Come here, let me look at you," Dorcas says, moving over to reach out and grab Regulus' shoulders, turning him slowly. She hums in a pleased fashion when he faces her again. "Yes, very pretty, but not only just. You're a star, Regulus."

"Ha ha," Regulus says flatly.

Dorcas chuckles, pivoting to face James. "Now, let me see you. Oh, this is good. Very good. You're shining, James."

"Very funny, Dorcas," James teases as he comes to a stop in front of her.

"Laughter is the music of the soul, my loves," Dorcas says sagely. "Right, let's start with you, Regulus. You're the one Sirius is most worried about. Now, your outfit is a very good talking piece should you feel uncomfortable, or not know what to say, or don't know how to answer. There will be cameras at all angles, so when you stand up and spread your cloak, give a slow spin so everyone will be able to see it."

"Alright," Regulus murmurs, nervous all over again.

"Your cloak is the main event. The Leo constellation with the brightest star: Regulus. Do you know the myth behind it?"

"About Hercules, yes."

"Don't be afraid to tell it, and don't hesitate to draw the comparison between you and Hercules. He defeated the lion, making him a champion. Play into that, if you need to."

"Right, but Regulus is the heart of the lion. The comparison between me and Hercules doesn't make sense. I'm not the champion; I'm the slain."

"I know," Dorcas tells him, her voice softening. "That's the hidden message, Regulus. That's the *truth.* People will see it. Not all of them, but some of them, and it will mean something. It can mean something to you, too, because you're the one that is being sent to your death. Be a champion anyway."

Regulus finds that he can't respond to that past the lump that blocks his throat. He dreads every second that brings him closer to the arena. There's the rest of today, the interviews tomorrow, and then the next day they go. He's not ready. He doesn't think he'll ever be ready.

"This is something personal," Dorcas murmurs, reaching out to gently run her finger over the crown-shaped choker resting around his throat. "You come from a family of Victors. Royalty, if you will. There's a saying—heavy is the head that wears the crown. The thing is, this is no crown that sits upon your head and grants you power. It is a *collar,* and no one should dare think any different. We'll make them look at it, because ignorance is bliss, and they don't deserve bliss when you're suffering at their hands."

"Thank you," Regulus whispers, and in that moment, he understands what she means about expression, about how moving it can be. She really does design in bold.

"Don't thank me. Believe in yourself, because I already do," Dorcas tells him quietly, holding his gaze for a long moment, and then she smiles and turns to face James. "Now, you."

"Me," James says, blinking at her.

"Your cloak works much the same as Regulus'. Sirius has informed me that your interview will be after his, so I don't doubt that Rita will want you to show off first to get it out of the way," Dorcas explains. "Yours, of course, is different in that it's not multiple stars; it's only one."

James huffs a weak laugh. "The sun."

"A very important star to us all, but there's meaning in it as well," Dorcas declares firmly. "What you can lean into is that getting too close to the sun ensures that you'll burn up. You're the sun in this scenario, James, and that's the warning. The hidden meaning, though? We need the sun to survive, and yet it still sets. What happens if it doesn't rise again?"

"I don't know," James admits.

Dorcas smiles. "Exactly. No one does, but I can promise you, no one wants to find out." She steps forward and runs her hands gently over the broken crown pieces at each of his shoulders. "We talked about this. One for your mum, and one for Sirius. Your exposure to what being a Victor really is. There's a saying—the weight of the world on one's shoulders. You've felt it before, and you carry it still. Carry it a little longer, James, and never stop rising."

"Right," James whispers, staring at her with wide eyes, and Regulus understands. The force of Dorcas Meadowes looking at you like that is heavy and life-altering. She sees the world in a way no one else does, and she looks at those around her just the same. It's both frightening and invigorating.

"Gid, Fab, get them undressed and let them go rest," Dorcas says. "They're going to do lovely, I just know it, and I've a party I need to attend. Good luck, my loves, we'll be right there in the crowd tomorrow, just for the two of you."

And, with that same commanding, larger-than-life presence that she used with her entrance, she makes her exit. Regulus looks over at James to find him already looking back, and then Gideon and Fabian are ushering them both off. When Regulus glances back, James is already doing the same.

This time, Regulus doesn't look away until he has no choice.

~•~

Remus, shockingly, likes working at events. Well, he likes it as much as anyone in his position can like anything, meaning he hates it with a burning passion, *but* he does get something out of it from time-to-time.

What he gets out of it, generally, is information. Gossip. Secrets. There is a lot to be gleaned from a party full of high profile Hallows when the drinks are flowing and the people are speaking with loose lips. Sometimes, Remus thinks he knows more about the inner-workings of the Hallow than even Riddle. The things that he hears… The things that he knows… Well, he could do a lot of damage with it all, honestly.

But, really, he can't. He has a mask, one he can't remove, not here. Not with these people. He hates it, and what he hates more is that he's fucking used to it. He's worn it every day for five years, and the only time he takes it off is when he's eating, or when he's in the suite he's assigned to now. He doesn't know when the discomfort of having the mask on shifted into a sense of strangeness when

he has it off. He hates that, too.

Remus' duties at the event are fairly simple. He's not the only servant here, and there's an unspoken agreement between all servants (unspoken for obvious reasons) to divide and conquer for wider coverage. It's a solid rotation, like cogs working in a machine, all of them circling the room from one station to the next. There's pouring drinks for people, or offering trays of food, or working at the bar, or cleaning in the back, or preparing more food and drinks in the kitchen; and, of course, there's the overall station that remains a priority at all times, in which the servants are at the beck and call of everyone around them for *anything* they need or want.

Currently, Remus is in the middle of pouring Joffrey Macnair more wine while simultaneously listening to gossip about one Sirius Black. He's a little too interested, honestly; he shouldn't be, he knows that, but he can't help it. There's some secret, glowing satisfaction that he *knows* they're wrong.

"Francilla is *insisting* that he's taken her to bed," Joffrey says in a low voice, talking to Devina. "She said she wouldn't pledge her sponsorship for nothing less, and there are whispers of a *sizable* donation already promised in his name."

"He sure is getting around this year," Devina murmurs, holding out her wine. Not even in Remus' direction. She just lifts it a little and expects it to be filled, which it will be. "I'm not surprised. It's his brother and closest friend this time, so naturally he cares more for them. It's a pity, isn't it?"

Joffrey hums, sipping his wine. "Yes, I know. I asked him who he thinks would kill the other, but he didn't quite give me an answer, the tease. Just winked, laughed, and told me to watch the show to see. My money is on James."

"Oh, *is* it?" Devina asks, leaning in with a soft gasp. "You naughty thing. Did you promise a donation as well?"

"Well, a gentleman never kisses and tells, Devina," Joffrey replies with a smooth laugh.

Remus steps back, his breath held. He wants, rather violently, to smash the bottle over both of their heads. Sirius has done no such thing, of course. He hasn't brought *anyone* to his bed, and he's quite busy with doing everything he can to help his little brother and best friend. It's beyond fucked up that they can't see how horrible of a situation this is for Sirius, and they're just fucking sitting here, discussing him like he's nothing more than a piece of meat.

"Joffrey, Devina, I *thought* that was you," comes the bright voice of none other than Sirius Black himself, which causes Remus to freeze as Joffrey and Devina pull away from each other to turn in their chairs.

"Sirius," Joffrey greets warmly, launching himself up from his chair to lean over and kiss each of Sirius' cheeks, which Sirius allows with a charming grin.

"My, you look so handsome tonight, Sirius," Devina comments as she holds out her hand.

Sirius bends over it instantly, gripping it and pressing a lingering kiss to it as he winks at her. As he stands up, his gaze flicks to Remus, and his smile softens a little. "Thank you. Someone very dear to me helped me pick my outfit."

"Dear, you say?" Devina asks curiously as Sirius takes a seat next to her. Remus turns away to pour another glass of wine, a smile trying to form under his mask, even though that's literally never happened before, and it's quite impossible with how tight to his face it is. "By *dear,* you mean…?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" Sirius teases.

"Do my ears deceive me, or has someone managed to capture and ensnare the ever elusive Sirius Black?" Joffrey muses, clearly fishing for information.

"Perhaps I'm only elusive to those who don't have anything to offer me," Sirius replies easily.

Remus leans down next to him and offers him a glass of wine. Sirius glances at him only briefly before he takes it, but he makes sure their fingers brush as he looks away. For a moment, as Remus straightens up, he fantasizes about a life where Sirius was born in his district, where they could have known each other outside of a setting like this, where Remus could have done things he doesn't dare to do here.

He doesn't have anything to offer Sirius. Genuinely not one thing. He's chained to his forced servitude to the Hallow, nothing to his name, and no possessions to claim. And yet, Sirius is the least elusive person Remus has ever known. Is that a choice? Or does he just know the real Sirius?

"Well, I wouldn't know anything about that," Joffrey announces, crossing his legs and leaning back with a grin. It's shark-like. "I have much to offer. You need only ask."

"If I were to ask, it would be a request, not an offer," Sirius points out, and he reaches over to gently lay his hand on Devina's knee like an afterthought. It makes her hide a smile behind her wine glass, and it causes Joffrey's eyes to zero in on it, his nostrils flaring. "And you, Devina? Do I elude you?"

"You are quite the enigma, indeed," Devina admits with a rich laugh, reaching out to place her hand on his chest, like she has a right to it. Sirius lets her. "I think there are some who would offer the world to see the inside of your mind. What must go on up there, I wonder."

"Oh, you can't imagine the things I have hidden up there. I'm afraid the cost of sharing it is an amount so few have been capable of meeting," Sirius tells her, smiling as she walks two fingers up his chest slowly, gazing into his eyes. Without ever breaking her gaze, he lifts his wine and takes a slow sip, the temptation of his curled lips peeking over the rim.

"Name your price," Joffrey states firmly, sitting forward.

Sirius focuses on him again and takes his hand off Devina's knee. "Make an offer. Let's see if you meet it."

And, just like that, Joffrey does.

What follows is a very convoluted dance in which Sirius plays Joffrey and Devina for fools, using them against each other to get the promise of their support when the games start. Sirius hardly has to do very much at all, other than sit there and let Devina run her hands all over him, pointedly not letting Joffrey do the same; in turn, Sirius only ever touches Devina's knee, removing the contact as a sign of approval when Joffrey has done something he likes.

It's—fascinating, almost. Terrible, yes, but the way he plays them to his will, twisting them around his fingers with one short conversation and a few gestures—it's like magic. There's something dangerous about it as well, how simply Sirius does it, how alluring he is that he *can* do it. He's magnetic, and people want him, but never for the right reasons. That's where it's sad. Remus' heart sort of breaks for him, actually, that he *can* do this, that he *has* to do this, because he does. Because there's no doubt in Remus' mind *why* Sirius is doing it; all of it is for James and Regulus, that much is clear.

Remus tops up their drinks one more time before he rotates out with the next servant, ending up at the bar. From this vantage point, he can see the whole room, and he can see as Sirius proceeds to

work it. The night carries on with Sirius making his way from person to person, laughing brightly and turning people to puddles for him to play in.

Sirius does seem to give himself breaks in between, chatting with other mentors, from what Remus can tell. Remus knows that getting all these sponsors to do what he wants is a precaution, because no one knows what's going to happen yet. And from what Remus has learned over the years, it can take multiple donations from multiple sponsors to afford a couple of small loaves of bread, let alone more necessary things such as medicine for injuries. So, it doesn't surprise him that Sirius takes small breaks only, consistently working as much as he can.

There is one point where Sirius comes to the bar with a blonde woman Remus quickly learns the name of—Marlene. They chat as they order drinks, and under the dim lights, Sirius gives him a very special smile. Remus never quite realized until tonight, but Sirius smiles at him differently than he does all those other people. This is a warmer smile, a more bashful one, and it's so much sweeter than Remus can really wrap his head around.

"Oh, oh, Sirius," Marlene hisses as Remus slides her a drink. She starts swatting at Sirius' arm. "That's Dorcas. That's—"

"Pipe down, McKinnon, she's not a celebrity. You seem a little starstruck," Sirius teases.

Marlene swats his arm harder. "Shut up. Fuck, just *look* at her. I mean, she's legitimately mouth-watering. How are you around her without constantly fainting?"

"She's not really my type," Sirius says, lips twitching.

"A sexy Hallow isn't your *type?"* Marlene asks incredulously.

Sirius chuckles. "A sexy Hallow that my *friend* quite clearly fancies, so no, not my type. I have a little integrity, believe it or not. See? Watch this. Oi, Dorcas!"

"Sirius," Marlene chokes out, whirling around frantically and nearly spilling her drink. Remus quickly picks it up before she does, then gently slides it into her hand. Distracted and looking dangerously close to fainting, Marlene shakily raises her glass at Remus and wheezes, "Cheers," before knocking all of it back in one desperate gulp.

"Ah, Sirius, lovely to see you here," Dorcas greets as she moves over, leaning in for a hug as soon as Sirius does.

"And it's lovely to see you, as always. You're a vision, as always," Sirius replies as they break apart. "Tell me, did Regulus and James behave?"

"As much as they ever do," Dorcas tells him, amused. Her face softens as she nods at him. "They looked lovely, Sirius, and I know they're going to be just fine."

Tension visibly seeps out of Sirius' shoulders. "Thank you, Dorcas." He turns slightly, gesturing to Marlene. "Have you met Marlene? She's rather infatuated with you."

Marlene proceeds to choke into her glass, which Remus had dutifully refilled for her because she was looking a little desperate, honestly. She goes into a coughing fit, wiping the back of her mouth as she turns, looking mortified.

"Because of your work," Sirius clarifies with a grin. "She's rather infatuated with you because of your work."

"I—yes, hi," Marlene says weakly, holding her hand out.

"Marlene McKinnon. Yes, I know of you. The Victor that shocked the Hallow," Dorcas murmurs as she takes Marlene's hand and promptly brings it up to her mouth, kissing it. This isn't really unheard of for Hallows as a form of greeting, but it's usually only done for people you hold in high regard, or people you want to *think* that you hold them in high regard. Marlene looks at her with her lips parted. "I think I'm the one who should feel honored to meet you, honestly. I rather like anyone who can defiantly shock the Hallows, including myself. No one saw you coming, Marlene McKinnon, not even me, and *that* rather infatuates me about you."

"Well, isn't that lovely? Lots of infatuation going on here today," Sirius says pleasantly, winking at Marlene behind Dorcas. "I'll just leave you both to it, shall I?"

"Never can stay in one place for long, can you?" Dorcas teases, but she's still looking right at Marlene, even as their hands break apart all at once.

"Yes, well, people to do and things to see, or however that saying goes," Sirius says lightly. He

turns and looks at Remus. "I'll take another drink before I go, though."

Because Dorcas and Marlene seem to be genuinely swept up in some intense eye-contact, Remus allows himself to pour Sirius' drink slowly. Perhaps for the same reason, Sirius looks right at him, not looking away for the duration of the drink being made. His bottom lip catches between his teeth, a smile trying to form on his face, and Remus only has to look at him with a quirk of an eyebrow, just one twitch upwards, for his cheeks to flood with color. He looks flushed and flustered and utterly delighted, more so than anyone has been capable of making him so far tonight, and it's—fuck, it's *exhilarating*.

It's genuinely so thrilling that he can do that to Sirius when he's not even showing his whole face. Remus, a servant with nothing, not even the ability to speak, can do to Sirius what rich Hallows with more words than they know what to do with can't. They all want to, they all try, and none of them ever manage it—but Remus? He does it with ease.

When Remus pushes the glass over to him, their fingers brush again, a warm caress of contact that makes Remus' skin break out in goosebumps. Sirius' hand visibly shakes, his breath punching out of him, and he nearly drops the glass entirely. Remus snaps his hand out to catch it at the bottom, grateful he didn't pour too much so none spills over the sides, and he's quick to draw his hand away. Sirius is blushing harder.

He curls his glass to his chest, and Remus can tell he wants to apologize, so dangerously close to rambling and stuttering and turning into that lovely mess Remus has come to appreciate so very much. That would be very bad for both of them, so Remus steps back and ducks his head.

When he looks back up, Sirius is gone.

For a bit longer, Remus is subjected to seeing Dorcas and Marlene blatantly flirt with each other. They aren't ordering any more drinks, but they remain at the bar, and if he's honest, it's sort of amusing. Dorcas is very bold, and Marlene is a bit guarded, so this makes for great entertainment. Nonetheless, there's no denying that they get on *very* well, and Sirius is sweet to see to it that his friends have the opportunity to enjoy each other's...company. How thoughtful of him.

They're still chatting, but now Dorcas' hand is on Marlene's arm on the bar, and Marlene keeps getting blatantly distracted by the rings on her fingers, so much so that she repeatedly loses the thread of the conversation. Dorcas is patient with her, even seeming to find it endearing, and Marlene appears to grow just a bit meaner the more flustered she gets. They've gone from light conversation to mild bickering, and Dorcas looks like she's having the time of her *life*. Marlene looks like she wants to rip Dorcas' dress off, the poor thing.

In the end, Remus has to rotate from the station before he ever sees which one of them will inevitably make a proper move past getting to know each other and teasing one another. It's a bit disappointing, honestly, because that was the least troubling interaction he's seen between anyone at this horrible fucking party. Everyone else here is complete shit, while Marlene and Dorcas seem to be the only genuine ones, other than some of the other mentors. Well, except for Sirius, but he's working at the moment, and his job isn't exactly as glamorous as some would think. He's an actor, essentially, and a performer, and a manipulator, and a mystery, and so many things that Remus can't even fathom how he manages to balance it all with such effortlessness.

Remus sees Sirius a few more times as he works, but they don't get near each other again. Instead, Remus has to watch across the room as people touch, talk, and flirt with Sirius, while Sirius touches, talks, and flirts back. Which is fine. That's fine. Remus is fine. It makes sense, actually, because Sirius is doing what needs to be done to help ensure that Regulus and James will be safer and have more support. Remus knows this.

Does that mean Remus doesn't want to break every finger on every hand that dares to touch Sirius? No, of course he does. He wants to snap them all one-by-one, which is a violent thought that he should shy away from, but he almost relishes in it. It's been *ages* since he's gotten this worked up about anything, so it's sort of—nice, in a way, to know that he still has it in him. The fact that it has to do with Sirius… Well.

Remus tells himself it's just being protective, because really, these people treat Sirius like he's a fucking object that they can play with, or buy, or pick up and put down at will. He's so much more than that, so Remus being angry on his behalf would make perfect sense. They're...friends. Sort of. Right?

But, deep down, Remus knows what it is. He *knows* it's an unearned sense of possessiveness, tangled with jealousy and envy that leaves a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. He knows that's senseless, because he has no right to Sirius, but the feelings exist anyway. That steady pulse of *he's not yours to touch,* which makes no sense, because he's not *Remus'* either; and then there's the sharp twist in his chest at every word that they get to say to Sirius, free to speak and gain his attention, only to fucking *waste* it; but perhaps the most pressing feeling is the way he wants the same things they all do, but without wanting them for the wrong reasons. He wants all of Sirius' focus, too. His touch. His laughter. Anything and everything Sirius Black, he wants it—most importantly, he wants it where no one can see, and he wants to never breathe a word of it, and he wants it to be something only they know about, no one else.

Of course, the acknowledgement of his wants only frustrates him, because he *knows* that's literally the worst thing he could do. That's the most dangerous thing he could do. There would be no penalty for this; they would just torture him until he fucking died, if they ever found out.

It's not proper. Remus *shouldn't.* He keeps telling himself that over and over, and then he sees a

man lean in close to whisper into Sirius' ear and he's viscerally reminded that he's not very good at being proper or doing what he should.

The only thing that stops Remus from doing something very, very stupid is the fact that none of them—no one Sirius talks to, or flirts with—make him blush. They don't get his soft smiles. They don't make his hands tremble.

No, that's Remus. Just Remus.

At one point, Remus is in the back, washing various glasses and trays. It's a fairly secluded area, only one way in and one way out. The dishes come in on a conveyor belt that he controls, and the servant before him didn't let it get backed up, which was nice. There's a separate, smaller room with racks for the dishes to be dried, and the door squeaks every time he goes through it. Otherwise, it's rather quiet. He likes it better back here than out at the event, except for the fact that he can't actually see Sirius from here.

Remus is in the middle of washing a glass when the door peels open, and he looks over in surprise because it's far too soon for a rotation already, but then his eyes bulge when Sirius pokes his head in. He immediately starts to open his mouth to speak, and Remus dives forward quickly to clamp a hand over his mouth, which makes him inhale sharply.

Sirius stares at him with wide eyes, frozen in place. Remus shakes his head and draws his hand away, lifting his finger in front of his mask to indicate that he should be quiet. Very carefully, Remus sits the glass down and reaches out to run the machine before it's even fully loaded, the loud whirring filling the space. Even still, Remus jerks his head and moves over to the room with the drying racks, holding it open as Sirius slips into it. Remus follows and shuts the door, then reaches up to unclip his mask.

"You shouldn't be back here," Remus whispers, his voice barely even a breath. "Sirius, people will notice—"

"No one's going to notice, Remus," Sirius murmurs, stepping closer to compensate for how quietly he's speaking. "I told everyone I was leaving. The party is slowing down now, so I could slip off. I just—I wanted to say hi. Um. Hi."

"Hi," Remus replies with a breathless laugh. "You look nice. I hear someone very dear to you helped you pick your outfit?"

Even in the low lighting, Sirius' blush is glaringly obvious. He shifts a little restlessly. "Yes, well… Yeah."

What Remus really likes about Sirius is the fact that he'll just say things that are true. Sometimes with a lot of stuttering and very blatantly embarrassed about it, but he will. He's a perfect blend of shy and shameless.

"Well, they have excellent taste," Remus teases softly.

"It's been helpful," Sirius whispers. "The outfit, I mean. I know you've seen me tonight with—with *them.* It's not—I'm not exactly proud of it, but there's nothing I wouldn't do for Regulus and James. I know what it looks like, but I'm not—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in, "you don't have to explain yourself to me. I get it. I already know."

Sirius bites his lip, and the motion draws Remus' eyes to his mouth. "I'm sure you hear things, though. No one ever thinks to censor themselves around the servants, so I can't imagine what nonsense you've heard about me."

"None that I believe," Remus assures him.

"Good, please don't," Sirius says with a weak laugh, like he's trying to make it seem like a joke, but he actually, desperately means it. "I just wanted to say hi before I go, and tell you thank you. Seeing you really did improve my night, Remus."

"Glad to help."

"Will you—are you coming back to the suite tonight?"

"No. I have to return to my cell after I finish here," Remus admits with a sigh.

"Oh." Sirius nods slowly, doing nothing to hide the way that disappoints him. "Will I see you again in the morning?"

Remus' lips twitch. "Yes, and I'll be there following the interviews as well."

"Brilliant," Sirius breathes out, perking up immediately. He breaks out into a grin and gestures to the door as he attempts to slide his hand in his pocket. He keeps missing it. "Right, I should go. Don't want to be too risky. I shouldn't have—I'm sorry, Remus. I'll just—I'll see you in the morning."

"Sirius," Remus says, and Sirius pauses with his hand on the door handle. For a moment they're just staring at each other, and it's so quiet that Remus can hear neither of them breathing, holding their breath at the same time. Remus just wants Sirius here a little longer.

Slowly, Remus exhales and steps forward to reach out and capture a lone strand of Sirius' hair that fell forward from behind his ear. He carefully tucks it back into place, listening to the shaky, thin exhale and immediate following hitch in Sirius' breath. Remus' knuckles only just brush Sirius' jaw as he pulls his hand away, and Sirius sways forward like he's following it, like he's being reeled in.

"Goodnight," Remus murmurs, and Sirius sways right back with a violent blink of his glazed eyes and a harsh flush painted on his cheeks.

Sirius takes a moment, just breathing, and then he gives Remus that very special smile before saying, "Goodnight."

With that, Sirius swivels on his heel and quickly slips out of the tiny room, the door squeaking as he goes. It shuts after him, and Remus takes a moment to breathe as well, then puts his mask back on and returns to work.

Chapter End Notes

sirius really would wear a plastic bag if remus told him to, and i stand by that. they're so cute, i want to bite them.

lmao, i love that literally everyone looks at regulus and they're like: that is the most grumpy, awkward man on the planet, he knows NOTHING about how to be charming, so he's absolutely going to bomb his interview 😭😭😭 HELP that's so mean, but it's true. regulus is NOT interview material.

then you've got james, who is like: hey, so um, i know im really charming and all, but im a REALLY bad liar when im scared and this may be a problem. hello? is anyone

listening to me? no. okay. great. just great.

well, it's like james said, maybe it'll be fine

fabian, my beloved <3 gideon, my beloved <3 dorcas, my beloved <3 marlene, my beloved <3

also the little hints of dorlene trust me, we see more of them in the future.

sirius just having everyone eating out of the palm of his hand, but he can't be normal and calm around remus for two seconds is EVERYTHING to me.

sirius, to everyone else: pathetic

sirius, to remus: talented, brilliant, incredible, amazing, show stopping, spectacular, never the same, totally unique, completely not ever been done before—

anyway, let me shut up. spoilers for the next chapter: the interviews happen!!! very exciting stuff. as someone who has already written all the arena stuff, im so impatient about keeping to this schedule, so it's lowkey killing me to do it, but im trying not to post too much too quickly. it's just so hard, because im so far ahead in the story that im like: 😭😭😭 i want everyone to catch up!!!!

so, im very, VERY tempted to bump back up to posting three times a week because im genuinely flying through this fic and just have, like, so many chapters sitting and waiting to be posted. im so indecisive, i don't know what im gonna do.

generally speaking, i usually post chapters every two days—that's how i did every other fic ive ever posted—because i write a good portion of my fics before i ever post the first chapter, that way i don't really get behind. i was planning to just post two times a week with this one, to like try and not put too much pressure on myself, but now im just itchy and agitated because i want to post more 😭

so, i think this is what im gonna do. ill post every two days at my discretion, and if i need a break, or i feel pressured or something, ill take a few extra days and just let everyone know in the end notes. you can all just come read whenever you like.

sorry for being all over the place, but im a mess of a human being, honestly, so you just gotta roll with it here at zeppazariel central ♂ all i can offer you is the reassurance that i will tell you which day i will be posting the next chapter on in the end notes, and unless any real life changes come up, i always keep to my word on that.

so, hey, READ THIS!!!! IMPORTANT INFO!!!!! WEE-WOO WEE-WOO

I WILL SEE EVERYONE ON TUESDAY!!!!

TUESDAY!!!!

okay, yeah, i think you all got that, probably.

bye, see you tuesday

The Interviews

Chapter Notes

hello all! im like, stupidly excited for this chapter. as the chapter title suggests, it's the interviews!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-references to torture
-description of characters being anxious/nervous
-brief display of violence (quickly stopped, and no one is seriously injured)
-a bit of angst

enjoy the drama ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus can tell that everyone is nervous. He'd offered to go and wake them all up, which Pandora had seemed grateful for. He starts with James, who he knows is generally up early as it is, so there won't be any issues there.

"Morning, Remus," James greets when he opens his door. He sounds less cheerful than he usually does when greeting him.

"Good morning, James," Remus murmurs. "I just wanted to be sure that you're up and ready for the day."

"Up? Yes. Ready for the day? Well…" James grimaces slightly and runs his hand through his hair.

Remus is silent for a beat, then he says, "If it helps at all, I find you to be very likeable. You're kind and funny, James. I doubt you'll have any issues for your interview."

"Yeah?" James brightens up a little at that. "Thank you, Remus. I'm just—well, I'm nervous. Not just for me, but for Regulus, too. And—and it's also our last day before…"

"I know," Remus says softly, his heart squeezing in his chest. He's never really grown attached to

anyone as a servant before; no one cares about him, so he returns the favor. And yet, when it comes to this group of people—Sirius, James, Regulus, and even Pandora—Remus finds that he's come to care about them so much in such a short amount of time.

James huffs out a weak laugh. "It's a shame I'll be gone soon. I think you and I could have been friends."

There's something so irrevocably sad about that, even more so because Remus can tell that James means it, and believes it. To him, it doesn't matter that Remus is a servant. So, Remus keeps his voice light as he teases, "I thought we already were."

"No, yeah, we are," James agrees, grinning. He looks so relieved to have something to be cheerful about.

"I have to go wake the rest," Remus tells him. "Breakfast is already finished, and you should eat."

"Alright," James says. "Hey, you'll eat with us, yeah? Sirius likes it when you do that. Well, we all do, but today… Er, you always cheer him up, that's all. He likes you, Remus. A lot."

"I know," Remus repeats once again, this time with a tiny smile, and James' eyes sparkle with delight. "He's not very subtle about it."

James laughs. "Bless him, he's really not."

"He doesn't—do anything," Remus ventures cautiously, not entirely sure how to put into words what he means.

"Yeah, he won't," James replies simply, and Remus can't stop himself from frowning. Seeing it, James sighs. "It's—I mean, in fairness, the power imbalance is… Well, I know none of us really talk about it, but we're painfully aware."

"It's not his fault, or anyone's," Remus points out. "It's not as if you all did this to me, and you've made my assignment here as comfortable and close to freedom as I'll ever have."

"I get that, but Sirius won't cross a boundary," James tells him, sounding solemn. "We see you as Remus, our friend, but we also know that we have superiority over you that none of us asked for. We could—we *wouldn't,* not ever, but we could have you killed, or we could make you do...fucking anything, honestly, and it's awful. It's not right. None of us would ever, *ever* cross boundaries with you, because you deserve them, and you deserve for us to respect them."

Remus feels like there's a band tightening around his chest, just from that blunt declaration of consideration. It's basic human rights that Remus doesn't have as a servant, and yet they *all* grant it to him without question. That's more important to him than he could ever express to any of them. There's just one *tiny* problem, though.

"But what if I *want* Sirius to...do things?" Remus asks weakly, feeling oddly embarrassed, his face heating up.

"I thought you might," James teases, beaming at him. He looks fucking ecstatic. "I suppose the question is, if you want something done, why don't you do it yourself?"

Remus stares at him.

James chuckles. "Who said it has to be Sirius? You can. That'd tip the scales on the power imbalance, don't you think?"

The mere thought sends Remus' brain into an uproar of fear and desire all tangled up together. He could. He *could,* but could he, really? That's fucking dangerous. If it were Sirius to do something, then Remus would be able to just—go along with it. Less control that way, which is his normal, what he's used to. Five years ago, Remus would never have stopped to have this internal debate. Actually, five years ago, Remus would have fucked Sirius by now, probably.

Remus swats that thought firmly out of his head, because it's making his heart race, leaving him jittery. He's too enticed by it. Tempted. "Right, I'm going to wake the others now. Nice chatting with you, James."

"Same to you, Remus, anytime," James replies with a note of satisfaction to his tone. It makes Remus fond, how pleased he is to be his best friend's wingman. They're sweet, James and Sirius, and their love for each other is palpable.

The next person to wake up is Regulus. Like Sirius, he does *not* appreciate being up early, and he

looks really tired. There are purplish-grey impressions under his eyes, which are bloodshot and watery, and his exhaustion practically falls off of him in waves. He's quiet and reserved, but he's never disrespectful to Remus. He greets him in a quiet mumble, thanks him, then waits for Remus to greet him in return before shutting the door. Remus hopes he doesn't go back to sleep, because he is *not* knocking again. Pandora can handle it.

Speaking of, she's the next person Remus wakes up. Pandora greets him through a yawn, rubbing her eyes like a child, and she smiles at him sweetly as she thanks him for waking her. She offers to make breakfast, then gently berates him when he admits he's already done it, then lightly bullies him into agreeing to share breakfast with them.

Remus did admittedly save Sirius for last, because he's biased and not above a little favoritism. So, alright, maybe he's letting Sirius get as much sleep as he can. What of it?

Sirius doesn't come to the door while cursing, which had admittedly amused Remus the last time. Instead, he opens the door and blinks sleepily at him. A tiny, lopsided smile curves his mouth, despite how tired he also looks, a world-weary exhaustion more so than lack of sleep. He looks unbearably soft like this, just waking up, his hair ruffled and lines creasing his cheek that he probably doesn't know about.

"Good morning, Remus," Sirius greets warmly, his fingers fiddling mindlessly with the doorknob.

"Good morning, Sirius," Remus replies, and he gets such a vivid impulse to reach out and touch him that he almost thinks he's done it without realizing. He tucks his hands behind his back to be on the safe side, then wonders *why* he's doing that, why he's holding himself back, only to then be reminded why he is and why he should. It's not proper. It's dangerous.

"Hi," Sirius says, then snorts. "Oh, no, I'm not doing that again. Once was embarrassing enough. Sorry, hi, I just—oh, lovely, did it again anyway. I'm going to shut up now."

Fuck propriety, actually. What's life without a little danger anyway? Dead boring, that's what. Remus can't help it; there's just something about Sirius that tugs at him until he genuinely can't resist, and at the moment, he doesn't want to. He's still careful, despite everything, only stepping forward to reach out and tug Sirius' shirt up where it's slipping down over his shoulder, wrinkled and warm cotton that's just a bit too big.

Remus' knuckles brush his collarbone, and Sirius holds himself very still as Remus says, "I'd really rather you didn't."

"Well, that's a first," Sirius breathes out, gazing at him with such focus that Remus feels his stomach turn over. "Most people like it when I shut up, unless I'm telling them the things they want to hear. For some reason, I get the feeling hearing me tell you *hi* over and over isn't exactly the height of sophisticated conversation for you."

"I don't know, I like it," Remus mumbles, spending far too long holding onto Sirius' collar. He can feel the warmth of Sirius' skin beneath the backs of his fingers. There's a war going on inside him at the moment, one side battling in favor of him tugging Sirius in until they're kissing while the other rages on in favor of him letting go.

Sirius doesn't help either side of this battle, remaining firmly locked in place. He just smiles and asks, "Yeah?"

"You're my favorite hello," Remus admits, swallowing down a sigh as he pulls his hand back. It's not a complete loss. At his admission, Sirius does that very deep, intense blush that sneaks down all the way to where his chest peeks out a bit.

"Oh," Sirius says softly. "Well, hello."

Remus chuckles. "Hi."

"You know, maybe you're onto something. I like it, too," Sirius tells him with a broad grin.

"Mm, I can tell," Remus muses, shaking his head. "Go on, get dressed. Breakfast is ready."

"Right. Today," Sirius mutters, his smile falling. He says *today* like it's the root of all evil. He looks like he's dreading it, and then his eyes lock onto Remus hopefully, as if Remus is the one source of good in *today.* "Will you—"

"Yes, I'll have breakfast with you," Remus cuts in, still secretly pleased that he can interrupt. "With everyone, I mean, but you know what I mean."

Sirius is smiling again, which was the goal. "Brilliant. I'll get ready, then meet you there. Well, meet everyone, but—"

"Goodbye, Sirius," Remus says, exasperated because Sirius is teasing him, his eyes sparkling with humor.

"Bye, Remus," Sirius replies with a delighted little laugh before he shuts the door, and Remus stands there for a long moment, that laughter ringing in his ears.

His favorite hello, indeed, and his hardest goodbye.

~•~

Regulus has always been very good at hiding things, at least from the moment he had things to hide. When he's scared, when he's hurt, when he's nervous, when he's feeling anything he deems a weakness—he knows exactly how to hide it, to cover it up so he looks calm, neutral, completely uncaring.

Before his interview, Regulus does just that, sitting in a tiny room with Pandora (who is watching the other interviews), Sirius (who is pacing with his arms crossed), and James (who is doing nothing to hide his own anxiety). What James could possibly have to be anxious about, Regulus doesn't know. *He's* not the one everyone is worried about; *he's* not the one who will have to fight to make people love him; *he's* not the one with complex relationships and secrets to hide.

No, that's just Regulus.

Sirius keeps glancing at him, then looking away quickly, a wrinkle of worry between his brows. It's sort of nice. Regulus wasn't expecting to see so much concern from Sirius, to be able to pick up on how much he *cares,* but it's there. Regulus can't deny it. He hasn't seen anything like it in years, and he never thought he'd want to see it again, but it's comforting.

Irene is being interviewed before Regulus, and Rita has plucked a few secrets from her with ruthless precision, including the one about having a crush on James. This is sort of ironic, because James is so lost in his own head that he isn't even paying attention, so he completely misses it. The Hallows love it, though. Irene is clearly a favorite, and she's working the crowd with lovely smiles and gentle laughter.

Regulus doesn't like her, but he can admit that she's a survivor who knows what she's doing, and she's going to be a tough act to follow. His stomach is tangled up into knots and only getting worse

as her interview draws to a close. Someone steps out to tell Regulus he has about two minutes, waiting to escort him to the stage, and his heart fucking *drops.*

"Hey," Pandora says quietly, moving over to crouch down in front of him, her eyes clear as she holds his gaze. She reaches out and cups his hands in both of hers, smiling gently. "I want you to do something for me."

It takes Regulus a second to respond past his rising nerves. He can see Sirius and James fluttering at the edges around him, likely trying to be comforting, or helpful, but Pandora takes all of his focus. "What?"

"I want you to find a very happy memory. The first one that you think of," Pandora murmurs. Regulus isn't sure why it pops into his head, but he thinks of the time he and Sirius snuck out of school to go pick pecans that they could sell at the market, just so they could buy sweets. It was Sirius' idea, of course, and they'd ended up cracking pecans open by the shell and eating them together while burning daylight. They'd laughed so much that day, and when they went to sell the pecans they gathered, they didn't even get enough money to buy more than one chocolate muffin, but they didn't mind. They just shared it. Regulus was nine. "Do you have it?"

"Yes," Regulus whispers.

Pandora smiles. "That's lovely. Now, as you go out there, I want you to think about the memory, yeah? Think about it and nothing else, and I want you to smile, because it's a happy memory that you can smile about. Don't think about Rita, or the crowd, or anything else—just think about that memory as you go sit in the chair. Will you do that for me?"

"I'll try," Regulus says.

"You're going to be fine, Regulus," James tells him, drawing his gaze. He gives him a smile. "Remember, you're an angel who's never done anything wrong in his life, not ever."

"Just for today," Sirius agrees with a shaky laugh, nodding when Regulus glances at him.

"I'm going to fuck this up," Regulus announces.

"No, you're not," Pandora counters firmly. She squeezes his hands, shaking her head at him.

"Confidence is key, Regulus. You will *not* fuck this up. You will go out there and get through it, and you'll steal more hearts than you think."

They don't really get to say anything else to him, because his time is up, and he has to go. Pandora draws back, and Regulus pushes to his feet, his heart thumping loud in his ears as he lets himself be led out of the room. He glances back one more time to see Pandora smiling encouragingly, Sirius looking blatantly worried, and James just—looking at him, something unbearably soft about his gaze. Regulus turns, and he goes.

The distant sound of Rita talking to the crowd reaches him as he draws closer, saying, "Now, I don't know about the rest of you, but I am *excited* to speak to our next tribute. Regulus Black, little brother to our beloved Sirius Black, thrown into a tense battle against James Potter to make it back home to his brother and make his family proud, no doubt. Let's give him a warm welcome, shall we?!"

In response, there's a cacophony of cheers and chants of his name that makes him want to turn and run in the opposite direction. His stomach lurches, but he continues to walk, squeezing his eyes shut as he tries to do what Pandora said. He thinks of that day, giggling with Sirius as he showed him how to crack two pecans together, peeling the shell with quiet laughter between them. It's hard to focus on the memory, but he does his best, and it manages to draw a tiny smile to his face despite everything else.

That smile lasts for all of five seconds as he walks onto the stage before ultimately falling as he takes in the waves of faces staring at him, cheering for him like he's not just a walking corpse. He wonders bitterly if they'd continue to cheer if he died right in front of them now, if they'd be horrified if it existed outside of their screens, or if they'd just laugh over his dead body because that's all he ever was to them anyway.

But there, to the left in the front row, Gideon sits with Dorcas and Fabian, and Regulus isn't prepared for how much of a relief it is to see them. To see Gideon, especially, who lifts his hand in a little wave and gives him a tiny smile. Somehow, that manages to keep Regulus going, to push him to continue to the chair right across from one Rita Skeeter.

Rita is a blonde woman in a silk dress, lips painted red and making her smile look even more dangerous. She looks right at Regulus like she's eager to crack him open and peel his shell, no different than the pecans. It takes two to do it, and Regulus has a feeling that Sirius will be the other. Suddenly, that happy memory doesn't seem so happy.

"Goodness, Regulus," Rita greets as the noise dies down, and she's addressing him like they're old friends, "you're almost as beautiful as your brother."

Regulus knows a backhanded compliment when he hears one, but he's not entirely sure what he was expecting. Of course Rita would do that, compare them, as if Regulus gives a toss about being as beautiful or more beautiful than Sirius when he's about to be fighting for his life *literally* tomorrow.

"Yes, well, we're related, so it makes sense for us to look alike. That's generally how genetics work," Regulus replies. He realizes belatedly that this may have been a rude thing to say and internally curses. "But, you know, I've seen siblings look different as well. It's a shame you never got to interview Sirius, Rita. He's very funny."

Rita hums. "Oh, yes, I've heard many things about the charm of Sirius Black, and I think it moved everyone when he volunteered for his darling baby brother. It certainly moved me emotionally. How did it feel for you?"

"It felt…" Regulus trails off, and the whole room seems to wait with a bated breath. *Innocent angel,* Regulus reminds himself, and he looks at Rita with wide eyes, blinking slowly. "It felt like he saved me. I was worried for him, worried that he wouldn't come back, but he did."

"You must have been so proud of him when he returned a Victor," Rita breathes out, hand to her chest, and the crowd seems to make soft, heartbroken noises like they sympathize. As if they ever could.

Regulus lies, of course. "He's a hero. My hero."

"Oh, that's just so…" Rita makes a small noise and reaches out to take his hand, squeezing it. Her fingers are cold, and her nails are shaped like coffins. There's some sort of symbolism to that, Regulus thinks. Someone out in the crowd is crying, which is so fucking stupid that Regulus struggles not to roll his eyes. "And do you plan to return home to your brother just as he did for you, Regulus?"

"Yes," Regulus says simply.

Rita drops his hand and leans back. "An honorable goal to strive for, but surely a complicated one. You are, after all, going into the arena with his best friend."

"I am," Regulus confirms.

"Are you and James competing to see who will make it back to Sirius' side?" Rita asks, clearly expecting him to feed into it, to boast about himself and how sure he is of his own victory.

An innocent angel would never do that, though, and Regulus honestly doesn't want to perpetuate the belief that they're fighting. It makes things harder. "No, not at all."

"No?" Rita says, sending a curious look towards the crowd before leaning in like her and Regulus are just trading secrets between them. "Does it not bother you that James may make it back to your brother, if you can't?"

"If it can't be me, then I would hope James makes it back to him," Regulus admits, and it's not even a lie, not really. "But it will be me. Nothing or no one is going to stop me."

Rita cocks her head. "Not even James?"

At this, Regulus hesitates, and Rita unfortunately picks up on his hesitation. He can feel his nerves rising again, though they had barely settled. It takes effort for him not to shift restlessly in his chair, and it's like he can feel every camera, every light, every eye focused right on him all at once.

"Are you and James close?" Rita asks, eyebrows raised.

Regulus can't clear his throat, because everyone will hear it, but he desperately wants to. "Well, I grew up with him, really. He is Sirius' best friend, so obviously he's not a stranger."

Rude, Regulus' brain points out, but is it? He genuinely can't tell. He doesn't know when he's being harsh half the time, because most of the time, that's just him being honest or pointing out the obvious. It's not like he's *trying* to be a prick; it genuinely just seems to come naturally to him.

"So, you never felt like you had to fight for your place in your brother's life?" Rita challenges, gaze sharp on him, probing, trying to find his weakness so she can slip the blade in and start peeling back his layers. "There's no part of you that's eager to triumph against James at all?"

Regulus knows what they all want to hear. Bloodthirsty and panting for drama. They want chaos, something to talk about, something to capture their interest. He refuses to give it to them, though he

knows that he could. He could say that he hates James, and Sirius, for the same fucking reasons; he could never say that he can't hate them, not really, for entirely different reasons altogether. He's full of complexities that these people would thrive on, and he won't show any of it.

"Sirius has never given me a reason to feel that way," Regulus lies without missing a beat, and he can see a small tick of frustration in Rita's jaw. The crowd lets out soft sighs and soft murmurs, a quiet *aw* drifting through the room, like they're all so touched. Fucking idiots.

"There must be some pressure on you nonetheless, coming from a family of Victors," Rita continues. "You would hate to be the first to fail, surely."

Regulus smiles at her, all teeth, bright and charming just like he's seen Sirius do a million times. "Well, if history is anything to go by, I don't have anything to worry about. Coming from a family of Victors—it's not a pattern I intend to break."

"Oh, that confidence—we love to see it, don't we?" Rita addresses the crowd, earning laughter and cheers, and Regulus can feel his smile becoming fixed. No one seems to notice, at least. Rita turns back to him, chuckling. "Now, I suspect you're also eager to get back to your parents, as well as Sirius."

Regulus doesn't expect it, but a laugh falls out of his mouth before he can stop it. He can hear the edge to it, so he tries to soften it, and it ends up being a little breathy. The absurdity of her statement makes his head spin a bit. "Oh, well, my parents are expecting me to come home, that's true."

"You have no desire to let them down, do you?" Rita says.

"I never have before, and I'm not going to start now," Regulus lies, glancing at the crowd with the sweetest smile he can muster, like his mother might be out there watching. It's the redirect game, just like Sirius said. He knows his mother and father must be watching at home, and for a moment, he wonders if they're worried about him.

He knows the answer to that.

As if she can sense his thoughts, Rita muses, "Surely they're at home watching you now. Do you think you're making them proud, Regulus?"

"I hope so," Regulus lies, glancing back at Rita. Again, the crowd titters and seems so touched by what he's said.

"Is there anyone else back home you're trying to get back to? A lover, perhaps?" Rita asks, and *everyone* seems interested in this, which agitates Regulus to no end.

"No," Regulus murmurs. "No one at home."

"I see. A family man," Rita teases, and the crowd laughs again, almost mockingly. He can tell they're displeased, but he knows why. Sirius has a reputation here, and they would all thrive on the idea that Regulus, like his brother, is a romantic. They don't know Sirius, though, not really. Regulus has no intentions of playing that role. Ever. "I suppose if you're a Victor, you'll have many options. Although, I have to be honest, I can't imagine how you don't have options already, with how handsome you are, especially right now."

"Well, I never said I didn't have options. I just said there's no one at home I want," Regulus points out, then realizes that he's being argumentative when he should have just agreed. His heart rate spikes, and he wants to get far away from this topic right now; he has an opening, thankfully. "I can't take all the credit for how I look right now. Some of it has to go to the design team." He inclines his head towards where Dorcas, Gideon, and Fabian are sitting. People start clapping politely, and they all wave and smile. "Honorable mention to Gideon, who works with me personally. James got Fabian, but I got lucky." At this, Gideon can be heard laughing loudly, and the crowd follows suit, laughing along with him as if Regulus has just told a very funny joke. "But, really, my outfit is lovely. There's more to it. I can show you, if you like."

"Oh?" Rita glances at the crowd, and they all break out into eager cheers, urging him on. Rita laughs grandly and sweeps out her hand. "Please do."

With a secret sigh of relief, Regulus stands up.

~•~

Sirius watches the screen as Regulus spreads his dark cloak and gives a slow spin. As soon as the cloth pulls tight, a white glow of the Leo constellation forms on the cloak, the outline of the lion glittering out to everyone. The heart of it, the Regulus star, shines the brightest.

Everyone loves it, of course. The crowd quite literally goes wild, and Sirius turns his head as he

paces the length of the room, agitated. He can feel eyes on him, and he knows it's James before he even looks.

"What?" James asks quietly. "He's doing well, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is," Sirius snaps, his jaw clenched.

James frowns. "Then what's wrong? He's doing everything you told him to."

"I *know* that, James," Sirius bites out.

"Sirius," James says softly.

Shaking his head, Sirius glances back at the screen to see Regulus sitting back down, explaining the constellation, his star being the heart of the lion, and the myth involving Hercules. Sirius looks away again. "He's lying. I can always tell when he's lying. Practically every word he's said was a lie."

"That *was* the point, Sirius," Pandora reminds him.

"Yes, well, you'll forgive me for not being ecstatic about hearing my brother call me his hero, all while knowing it's a fucking lie," Sirius snarls, whipping around to go stomping in the opposite direction.

James sighs. "You were sixteen. You shouldn't have had to *be* a hero. What you went through, that wasn't heroics. That was a tragedy, and it was unfair to you. He sees it that way as well."

"You don't know that," Sirius mutters, grimacing.

"I believe that," James tells him firmly. "Look, this isn't easy for me either. Do you think I didn't notice how hard he was avoiding telling everyone he hates me? He couldn't even bring himself to say we were friends."

Sirius scoffs. "He's a little prick, that's what he is."

"He's doing what you told him to do."

"I *know,* alright?! It's just—it's—"

James' face softens. "It's upsetting. I know. I get it."

"When he said that I never made him feel like he had to fight for a place in my life…" Sirius swallows thickly. "James, he was lying. That was a lie."

"Sirius," James whispers, his eyes sad. "Look at me, you know it's more complicated than that. You *know* it's not that simple."

"But he felt that way. I made him feel that way," Sirius insists, his heart feeling as if it's shriveling in his chest. "I didn't mean to, but I couldn't—I wasn't—"

"Stop it," James murmurs, but Sirius can't.

Sirius shakes his head. "He *still* feels that way, James. He's my little brother, and he's going to—he's going in the arena, and I can't—I can't take his place, I can't save him, I can't—"

"Sirius, hey, *Sirius,"* James cuts in quickly, launching to his feet to come over and put his hands on Sirius' shoulders, shaking him a little. "Breathe. Just breathe."

"There's not enough time," Sirius chokes out. "I don't have enough time to make it right."

James takes a deep breath and slowly releases it, waiting for Sirius to copy him. His voice has softened. "You both have been through unimaginable things, and you've suffered so much, but you're his brother, Sirius. He knows, alright? Deep down, he knows you care about him, no matter what you've been through."

"How did we let it get so bad?" Sirius whispers, his eyes stinging. The question weighs heavy in

his mind. He knows the source was him; he was where it all went wrong, even if he can't remember. But he got better, as much as anyone can in his situation, so why didn't their relationship get better? Why didn't they try? Ten years. It's been ten years, and neither of them could bring themselves to try. Now, it's too late.

"It was a joint effort, I think. Between all of us," James says softly, his eyebrows pinched. "We—we did the best with what we had, Sirius. None of us are to blame."

Sirius knows what James is saying. Regulus was the one who pulled away, James was too busy taking care of Sirius, and Sirius was caught up in falling apart. They all had their own problems, and the repercussions of how they handled those problems lingered even after the problems weren't as pressing as they were at the start. By the end, none of them knew how to fix what they'd already brushed under the rug. The shattered remains crackled underfoot until they grew calluses and learned to keep walking, despite the cuts.

James squeezes his shoulders, holding his gaze. "You'll have time with him, plenty of it. I'll make sure of that."

"James," Sirius croaks.

"Let him help you," James whispers. "When I'm not here to do it, let it be him. He needs you as much as you need him."

Sirius swallows thickly. "I need you, too."

"You always have me, Sirius. I'm always with you, even when I'm gone. The ones who love us never really leave us." James smiles, a slightly trembling twist of his lips, and his throat bobs up and down. He pats Sirius' chest, nodding at him. "I will be right here. That's where I'll go, and that's where I'll stay. With you. You'll carry me with you forever, yeah?"

Sirius shakes his head, dangerously close to bursting into tears. He can't accept it. He can't face it. Doesn't know how. Doesn't think he'll survive it. If James—if he's gone, Sirius will go with him. There is no forever without James.

Exhaling deeply, James tugs on him, pulling him into a tight hug. Sirius all but clings to him, shaking all over. He wants to take James and Regulus, and *run.* Just run as fast as they can, as far as they can go, and never look back. He wants to split himself in half and take their places, die in their

stead, suffer so they don't have to. He wants to save them, and keep them, and he can't. It's going to kill him.

Someone steps out to give the two minute warning, making them break apart slowly. Pandora is still dutifully watching Regulus' interview. He's used up a lot of time talking about stars, which is working in his favor; less of a chance for Rita to yank any secrets out of him that way. Rita is winding down now, though, clearly about to end with Regulus and get started on James, who looks strangely anxious.

"You'll be fine, James," Sirius assures him, reaching out to squeeze his arm. "You weren't the one we worried about, in any case. The hard part is over."

"Er, Sirius," James says weakly, his eyes wide.

Sirius waves him off. "Calm down, yeah? You just go out there and put on that James Potter charm. You'll have them eating out of your palm in no time."

"Right. Right, but Rita—"

"Rita cares about secrets, and you don't have any. Well, none that I don't know already, and I assure you, the fact that you cried the first time you got high isn't exactly a secret that Rita will be after, so you're *fine."*

"Well, um," James starts, but he never gets to finish before Regulus comes into the room.

"That," Regulus declares, "was the single most torturous thing I have ever gone through. I feel filthy. And ill."

"You did *marvelous,"* Pandora praises, bustling over to him to usher him into a chair. He sinks down into it with a deep exhale, like he's just defeated a terrible foe.

"Did I?" Regulus asks, sounding unsure, and he lifts his head to look right at Sirius for his approval. In that moment, he could be five years old, looking up to Sirius after he managed to jump over a rain puddle, seeking his pride.

Sirius feels his heart clench, and his voice is a hoarse rasp when he says, "Yeah, Regulus, you did."

"Well, brilliant," Regulus mutters wryly, leaning his head back against the wall as his eyes drift shut. "I never want to do that again. Fucking hell."

Sirius doesn't have the heart to tell him that he will, in fact, have to do that again if he wins. Victors are interviewed at the end, and it's just another brutal process of rehashing all that happened in the arena. Sirius doesn't remember his Victor interview, not really. If it wasn't for Effie, he probably would have been catatonic on the stage.

James jumps when he's called, and he looks worried despite everyone's many reassurances. Sirius reaches out and squeezes his shoulder before he walks away, and Pandora gives him a gentle smile. Regulus doesn't even open his eyes to see him go.

Sirius moves over to sit down next to Regulus, gently bumping their knees together. Still, Regulus doesn't open his eyes, but a tiny smile briefly curves his mouth.

For now, that just has to be enough.

~•~

Rita wastes no time in getting James to show off his outfit, no doubt trying to get it out of the way. The crowd loves it when he holds his cloak out and spins, showing the golden sun that blazes to life on the white fabric. People *ooh* and *ahh,* gasping and cheering in hushed delight.

"Absolutely lovely," Rita comments when he sits down, and she smiles right at him, but James can't help but note that there's no warmth to her gaze. "Regulus the star, and you're the sun, the star that outshines him. Is there meaning to that?"

"What? No," James says, rearing back a little bit. "I don't outshine him. It's—that's not the meaning. Just, you know, the sun is warm, so warm it'll burn you up if you get too close."

"Like Icarus," Rita muses, and James nods tentatively. "And who would you say is your Icarus, James? Regulus?"

"No," James mumbles.

Rita laughs. "Well, aren't you a humble one?"

James takes in a small, short breath. He forces himself to relax. Okay, he can do this; he's brilliant at this. He knows how to smile, to put people at ease, to keep them happy. As he exhales, he smiles broadly and chuckles. "You know, my mum always did tell me to stay humble, and she's never wrong."

"Your mum. Euphemia Potter, a Victor herself, and at the tender age of thirteen, too," Rita says. "She was Sirius' mentor when he was a tribute, wasn't she?"

"She was."

"Do you think she's relieved to know Sirius is your mentor, or perhaps concerned, since his little brother is also a tribute?"

"My mum loves Sirius as if he's her own," James says, which makes the crowd let out soft noises, almost coos. "She holds no ill will for him or Regulus in her heart. She's—well, I know she's watching right now. Hi, Mum. Hi, Dad."

The room breaks out into laughter as he raises his hand and waves at the camera off the side of the stage. He imagines his parents watching, pressing their hands to their smiles as they see him beaming at them, being their goofy son with a smile that never wanes. It makes him inexplicably sad, but he isn't going to let it show. He chuckles along with the others, dropping his hand as he winks at a few people in the front row before turning to focus on Rita again.

"A man who loves his parents wholeheartedly; we adore that. You must miss them very much," Rita points out.

"I do, yes," James admits, because he does.

Rita clicks her tongue in sympathy, but James doesn't think it's real. "I'm sure you're eager to get back home to them."

"I'd love to see them again," James says carefully, perhaps too carefully, but he really is a shit liar when he's anxious. This is the truth, though. "They know my intentions to do what needs to be done, and I know they're proud of me."

"How lovely," Rita replies with a hum. "Let's talk about your reaping, how you must have felt when your name was called, only to hear Regulus' name afterwards. I can only assume you were relieved at first, knowing that your best friend would be beside you, but surely that relief soured when you heard your best friend's little brother would be your competition."

"He's not—we're not competing," James announces, shaking his head. "It's not like that."

"No?" Rita challenges. "You're not worried that Sirius will do more for his little brother than you?"

James clenches his jaw. "We're under no illusion of how difficult this is for all of us to navigate. What's important is that we're all doing our best, and we are. Sirius, especially."

"That's sweet, James, but I must ask… What will you do in the arena when it's just you and Regulus?" Rita presses, leaning forward with a frown, like she pities him. "You said you'll do what must be done. Do you think Sirius will forgive you for it when that includes his baby brother?"

"Well…" James swallows, feeling lost at sea. He wishes more than anything that Pandora or Sirius had coached him for something like this, because he has absolutely no idea what to say. He doesn't want Regulus—who is watching—to know his decision, and he doesn't think people would like it so much if they knew he was going into the arena with all plans to die. They like people who will fight, who aren't planning to give up. *Think, what would Sirius do?* James asks himself. Instantly, he laughs and plasters on an easy smile, leaning forward like he's telling a secret. "I suppose you'll have to watch and see."

Rita hums as the crowd responds pleasantly, clearly liking the suspense and implications. She laughs along with them and nods. "I suppose we will. I, for one, cannot *wait* to see what tricks you surely have up your sleeve."

"Oh, trust me, you have no idea what tricks I'm capable of," James teases, leaning back in his chair lazily.

"Well, well, you sure know how to bring a sense of anticipation, James," Rita praises. "Can I ask? Does *Regulus* know what tricks you have up your sleeve?"

"Honestly? He knows most of them," James admits, his lips curling up, "but not all. Never all."

"Do you think you'll surprise him, then?"

"I know I will."

Rita gives a theatrical shudder. "Oh, you sound so sure that you've gone and given me goosebumps. We're all on the edge of our seats; I daresay you have us hooked."

"Well, I have you right where I want you, then," James says with a grin, sweeping his gaze over the crowd. This time, he catches sight of Fabian with Dorcas and Gideon. Fabian is hiding a smile behind his fist, and James winks at him. Some of the people behind him think it's towards them, and they look like they're about to swoon.

"I can't help but notice that you speak of Regulus fondly," Rita tells him. "He mentioned that you two grew up together, but he didn't say much else. I think he was shy."

James' smile softens helplessly. "Believe it or not, he actually was shy when he was younger. He was very, *very* sweet. The first time I saw him, he was riding around on Sirius' back, asleep on his shoulder." Again, the crowd seems to find this unbearably adorable, and James can't really blame them. It *was* very cute, even then. "We met properly a few days later when I came to their house. Sirius dragged him out to introduce us, and he was certainly more bashful then. Very polite, though."

"Isn't that just adorable?" Rita asks the crowd, and they make loud noises of agreement. She laughs and turns back to James, her gaze sharp. "It's almost as if you see him as a little brother, too. That would make sense, if you grew up together."

"Er, no, not—definitely not," James says weakly, clearing his throat. Rita raises her eyebrows at him. "I just—I only mean that Regulus isn't… He's not just Sirius' little brother. He's his own person. I—I, um, worked that out as I got a bit older."

"Oh?" Rita murmurs, her tone light. "So, you would say that you two are close? Friends of your

own, perhaps?"

James can feel the eagerness in the room, the pressure building as everyone wants an answer one way or the other, metaphorical claws digging into his skin in persistent demand. He flounders for a moment, his heart racing, feeling frozen to the spot and overheated with every eye on him. How the fuck does he answer this? Does he—can he lie? *Should* he lie? He can't very well tell the truth, because that would be very bad for everyone involved. *Well, you see, Regulus hates me and has hated me for the last ten years or so, but the feeling isn't mutual, so it's all very complicated; can we talk about anything else?*

Yeah, no, James can't say that.

"Ah, we—well, we have a lot of memories together," James stutters out, struggling not to wince at how shaky his tone is. Rita looks fucking *delighted,* like she can tell that he's hiding something. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Not good. "A lot of good memories, in fact. With Sirius, too."

"But also without Sirius?" Rita cocks her head at him, her gaze piercing. "Did you and Regulus spend a lot of time alone?"

"I—well, no, not very much. I mean, sometimes we spoke when Sirius was getting ready to come down from his room, but um, mostly we just...all spent time together." James shifts restlessly in his seat. "But also, there was the time that Sirius was in the arena. I was there for him as much as I could be."

Rita makes a soft sound and reaches out to pat his knee, which feels very patronizing and only makes James' nerves even more tense. "Of course you were, but surely you had other friends."

"Er, yeah," James admits slowly. "I had a lot of friends back home. Still have, actually."

"That's lovely," Rita says. "You seem to have made a lot of friends here as well. Many other tributes spoke highly of you."

James breaks out into a smile. "Oh, yeah, I've met many lovely people here."

"I'd say you're a clear favorite, and with your gorgeous smile and undeniable charm, it doesn't surprise me at all. In fact, I think you've caught Irene's interest the most," Rita tells him, and the

crowd breaks out in titters and dreamy sighs. James is so confused right now, honestly. Is she implying…? "Could you see something blossoming between the two of you?"

"Er, in the arena?" James asks skeptically, a little incredulous. So, she obviously *is* implying what James thinks she is, but she can't be serious, can she?

Rita laughs. "Oh, sure. Love is like a flower that blooms even in the harshest conditions. Do you look for that to happen?"

"Between me and Irene? No. Goodness, no, we're just friends," James declares quickly, shaking his head. This is clearly not the right thing to say, because the crowd makes it *very* clear that they don't like this. James holds his hand up in surrender, internally panicking. "Not—not because of her. She's lovely, but I'm—I just, um, well—"

"I see what this is," Rita says softly, reaching out to grab his hand and pat the back of it. "You had feelings for someone back home, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah, actually," James confesses, relieved that the crowd has gone from being upset to being intrigued.

"You were dating someone?"

"No. It wasn't—I mean, he doesn't know how I feel."

Rita pats his hand yet again, and the crowd joins her in making soft, pitying noises. "You could always tell him now. After all, James, it could be your last chance."

"Ah, no, I really couldn't," James mumbles, huffing out a weak laugh. "It's...complicated."

"Feelings always are, aren't they?" Rita pulls her hand back and studies him. It looks like she has cogs turning in her mind, and the needling force of her gaze is just making his anxiety so much worse. "Well, if you win and return a Victor, you'll have to confess your feelings for him."

James snorts and says, "Well, if I win and return a Victor, I won't have anyone to confess *to."*

There's a long pause, and the entire room falls silent. James realizes a beat too late that this is possibly the stupidest thing he could have said. He goes very still, his eyes widening, and he can see a slow smile steadily splitting Rita's face. Oh, fuck. *Shit, shit, shit,* James thinks, his heart falling to the pit of his stomach. He did not just—why did he *say* that?

"Do you mean...Regulus?" Rita asks, gazing at him with this bright spark in her eyes, utterly triumphant. "A boy you had feelings for back home, a complicated situation, and if you win, that means he won't be there. Am I right?"

James waits for someone to come save him. He waits for the ability to turn back time and fix this mistake made in the shaky foundation of his anxiety, only growing worse from each second that passed from the start. He feels like shrinking down and hiding away from the world, but all eyes are on him, and he has nowhere to go. Helplessly, he glances around the room, finding nothing more but eager eyes and waves of delight for the drama unfolding before them.

"James?" Rita prompts, drawing his gaze. Her eyes are still sparkling, despite the tender frown on her face. She reaches out to put her hand on his knee again. "Is this true? Do you have feelings for your best friend's brother?"

"Um," James rasps, flexing his fingers on the arms of his chair, and he can feel how hard his heart is thumping against his ribs, threatening to break them in an attempt to break free. He opens and closes his mouth, then feels himself sink into the freefall, because he doesn't know what else to do. With a shaky laugh, he nods. "Yes, well, can you blame me?"

Rita's lips curve up at the side, just for a moment, and she squeezes his knee before leaning back. "No, I don't think anyone can blame you for that. He's beautiful, and I think I can speak for everyone when I say how unfortunate it is that you two are in these circumstances. It's a tragedy, isn't it, that you'll never know what life you two could have lived together? But remember, harsh conditions or not, love is like a flower that can bloom anywhere. I hope it blooms for you. Don't we all hope it blooms for James and Regulus?"

The room nearly trembles with the ear-splitting shrieks and cheers of support. People are crying, people are shouting advice, and some are telling him to love while he still has the chance. Rita doesn't interrupt it, and James swivels his head to look out at everyone, feeling faint and out of his depth.

It makes sense, in a way, because love is a universal truth. It is, despite everything, what most—if not all—people can agree on, in that people feel the call of it. People find hope in it. People *believe* in love, almost instinctively, because love exists all around them. In families, in friends, in lovers.

There's so much love in life, and it's what makes living worth it.

For James, in more ways than one, it's what will make dying worth it, too. For Sirius, yes, but also Regulus.

The interview doesn't last for much longer. Rita gives out a closing statement as James fixes a smile on his face, ears ringing, and then he's being escorted off the stage. He's almost as nervous to go back to the room as he was to leave it. What is he going to say to Regulus? Fuck, what is he going to say to *Sirius?* His brain is in an uproar, too much going on for him to make sense of anything at all.

James steps back into the room and shuts the door, turning around with a deep breath. He doesn't even get to exhale before his back is hitting the door with a loud thud, Regulus shoving him against it and pinning his forearm against James' throat, holding him in place. James wheezes, eyes bulging as he takes in the pure fury on Regulus' face, his lip curled into a snarl and his eyes blazing. Frankly, he's fucking gorgeous. These are less than ideal circumstances, admittedly, but James can't help but notice.

A steady stream of an angry tirade is spilling from Regulus' mouth, even as James gazes at him and thinks, helplessly, *you are so beautiful.* He'd probably say it like an idiot, because he's in it now, so why not? But Regulus isn't really giving him the chance between his arm at James' throat and his ranting.

"Are you fucking *mental?!"* Regulus is shouting. "Do you think this is funny, some sort of joke? Were you trying to tease me? Make me look weak? You stupid fucking—"

"Reggie! Regulus, *stop!"* Sirius scolds, then curses sharply under his breath and fully reaches around Regulus' front to grab him and haul him clear off his feet as he pulls him back. Regulus, being Regulus, tries to tip forward and get to James again, but Sirius ignores his dramatic flailing and carries on pulling him back.

"Put me *down!"* Regulus bellows.

Sirius swats him on the side of his head, snapping, "I will when you stop trying to attack him."

"He—"

"I *know.* I heard. I was there."

Regulus cranes his head to stare at Sirius in disbelief, his face flushed with anger. "Sirius! Let me *go.* He just told the entire fucking *world* that he—he—"

"Yes, as we've established, I *know,"* Sirius grits out, dropping him harshly enough that he stumbles a little bit. Sirius latches onto Regulus' arm so he can't get away. "You should be thanking him. Do you have any idea what he just did? He made you *desirable,* Regulus."

"He—you—" Regulus rears back, eyes wide. "Did you fucking put him up to this, Sirius?!"

"No, actually, that was all him," Sirius mutters, his gaze darting to James. His eyes narrow slightly, but he glances back at Regulus. "Stop being an idiot. Pandora, take him to go cool off, would you?"

Pandora moves over, winding her arm through Regulus' and gently tugging him towards the other door. "Come on, Reg. I know, I know, you want to kill him. Save it for the arena."

Somehow, Pandora coaxes Regulus out of the room, and James prods at his throat with a grimace. It doesn't hurt, really, but the pain behind the gesture tugs at his chest. What was he expecting, though? He knows Regulus hates him, so it would only make sense for Regulus to respond that way.

That doesn't make it hurt less.

Hesitantly, James drops his hand and drags his gaze up to find Sirius staring at him. His lips are pressed into a thin line, and his arms are crossed. Slowly, one eyebrow ticks up.

"So, er, I take it I failed my interview," James says weakly.

"James, what the fuck was *that?"* Sirius hisses.

"I just—I don't know what you want me to say, Sirius. She was dead awful, and I—I tried to—" James makes some sort of helpless gesture with his hands, and Sirius still looks tight with agitation,

and all the stress comes crashing down on James at once as his mounting frustration bubbles up in him until it spills over. "Well, it's not like I knew what to do! I *told* you I was worried, and you just kept brushing me off. What did you expect to happen when you and Pandora didn't coach me at all? I did my best on my *own,* because you certainly didn't fucking help me, did you?"

Sirius doesn't react for a moment outside of the tiniest flinch, something like horror flashing in his eyes, and then his eyebrows tug together as he drops his arms. He almost instantly reaches up to drag his hand over his mouth, then shoves it through his hair. "No, you're right. I—I'm sorry. I just thought—I don't know why I assumed you would handle it with ease. Even I didn't. No one does, really, and I shouldn't have expected you to. It's—I just admire you, so I…"

"I know I make it seem easy to get on with people, and for me, it generally is," James croaks. "Just...not so much when I'm being interrogated and I'm so scared that I can barely think."

"Fuck." Sirius' eyes sink shut, his face twisting. He hangs his head forward and scrubs his hand over his hair roughly once, twice, and then a third time before dropping his hand and looking up with remorse in his eyes. "Fuck, James, I'm really sorry. That was a lot to put on you. I should have —well, you're right, I should have helped you. If—if it makes you feel better, you did brilliantly on your own. You—you *didn't* fail."

James blows out a deep breath, his shoulders slumping as he looks at Sirius with wide eyes. "I didn't?"

"No, you…did really quite well, actually," Sirius says, and James instantly feels better. "You answered questions beautifully with only a few minor hiccups here and there, but they were smoothed over quickly. And I wasn't lying when I said that Regulus should be thanking you."

"You weren't?" James asks in surprise.

Sirius shakes his head. "You just solved the issue of everyone pitting you two against each other, and not only that, but you've given them reasons to root for *both* of you. What's more enthralling than war? A love story, that's what."

"Oh," James breathes out, feeling a hysterical laugh bubble up in the back of his throat. He didn't even *mean* to do that, but if it'll help Regulus survive… Well, brilliant.

"The thing is," Sirius says slowly, "you didn't do that on purpose. I know you didn't, James. Rita

dug that out of you. But that would mean it's true…"

James stares at him, holding his gaze, and then he lets his head thump back against the door. He huffs a weak laugh and lifts his hands before letting them drop back down limply. "What are you going to do, Sirius? Kill me?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sirius mutters, looking downright *exhausted.* James sort of pities him. "My brother, James?"

"Sorry?"

"Are you?"

"I mean…" James trails off, biting his lip. In his defense, he's never done anything to be sorry *for.* It's not as if he and Regulus have been running around behind Sirius' back. James just has hopeless feelings for him that he failed to mention to Sirius, very much on purpose.

"But, like, *why?"* Sirius' face screws up. "And *don't* say it's because you think he's pretty. You think *I'm* pretty—or you *better* think I'm pretty—"

"Yes, of course you're pretty, Sirius."

"Thank you. Moving on. I need an explanation."

James scratches at the side of his head, pursing his lips. "I mean, I—I *do* think he's pretty, to be fair. But you're right. He's just… Well, it started—er, do you remember his fifteenth birthday, when he hit me in the head with a snowball?"

"Yes. Is that—" Sirius stares at him incredulously. "Do *not* tell me my little brother *abused* you into forming a crush."

"Listen—"

"Fucking hell, James."

"Shut up, alright?" James mumbles sheepishly, his face getting hot. He averts his eyes. "Obviously it's more than that. *He's* more than that. His eyes, the way he talks, the little smile he tries so hard to hide. Even his anger, his pain, his—everything. I can't help it. I can't ignore it. I can't ignore *him.* And I know it's stupid, I know he hates me, but I just—I—"

"Yeah, alright, I—I got it," Sirius cuts in wearily, heaving a sigh as he reaches up to rub his finger furiously along his eyebrow. James can see him chewing on the inside of his cheek, processing. "So, all the flirting lately…"

"I...may have been indulging a little," James admits with some chagrin. He shrugs when Sirius drops his hand to stare at him blankly. "Well, you know, I'm going to die soon, so I may as well…"

Sirius flinches again, looking distraught in an instant, and James is so fucking scared of dying for a lot of reasons, but the main one is Sirius. He doesn't want to leave Sirius alone. He doesn't want to leave Sirius at all.

Something flickers over Sirius' face, and then his eyes widen as he whispers, "Oh. *Oh,* that's why, isn't it? Your choice—you said it was more than just for me. It's for you, too."

"Yeah," James says softly. "Yeah, it is."

For a long time, they can only stand there in stifling silence, utterly smothered by the tragedy that is.

And oh, what a tragedy it is.

Chapter End Notes

starting from the top:

remus really went to sirius' best friend and was like, hey why isnt sirius doing inappropriate things to me??? help??? lmaoooo the fact that james immediately sold sirius out. "he really likes you. a lot" JAMES DIDNT EVEN HESITATE 😭😭😭 but

also, he's a real one for being like, maybe YOU should do inappropriate things, ever thought of that, remus, huh? james "best wingman" potter is trying to get his best friend laid, and we love him for that.

not sirius being remus' favorite hello and hardest goodbye ☹☹☹ brb gonna cry. everyone sort of calls this a "jegulus fic" and there are times when jegulus gets the main focus (particularly in the games), but this is as much a wolfstar fic as it is a jegulus fic. this is very, VERY wolfstar heavy, and we also get a lot of dorlene, too. others as well, but i can't speak on the other relationships because we haven't gotten to them yet. we get there when we get there.

anyway, as for the interviews. regulus really did his best, you've gotta give him that. he held it together and lied his ass off. go ahead, king, you be a little innocent angel. james potter number one regulus stan: he's never done anything wrong in his life, ever. all regulus stans: i just think he's neat

side note: the pecan story will be used for further angst later on, just a warning

but also, sirius being sad because regulus was lying, so now he knows regulus doesn't see him as his hero 😭😭😭 that's so fucking upsetting. listen, regulus and sirius have A LOT they need to unpack and literally no time in which to unpack it. they make my heart ache.

then you've got james, who was SO anxious for his interview and NO ONE HELPED HIM 😭😭😭 like, everyone really looked at james and thought: now THAT'S a man who can do anything and charm anyone with no problem. and yeah, it comes from a place of admiration—even sirius is not immune. in a way, it's cute, because he's like: james is great, he can do anything, he's so cool and doesn't need help at all. yeah, real sweet, except for the fact that james is not perfect because no one is and no one can be, so it leads to moments like james accidentally confessing his feelings for regulus in front of the entire world.

i would like it on the record that sirius was not maliciously withholding his help from james—neither was pandora, for that matter—but he literally just admires james and believes in him THAT much. like, it came from a place of love. he didnt MEAN to put james in that position, and he was quite convinced that regulus was the one who needed help (and to be fair, regulus absolutely would have bombed that interview without all that help). still, james getting to be upset about being brushed off and put on a pedestal and having to do it on his own with no help was very cathartic.

lmao regulus was about to claw james' eyes out we get more on why he was so upset later, i promise. james really got mildly attacked by regulus and STILL was sitting there thinking he was beautiful. help this fool. and sirius smacking regulus upside the head will never not be funny to me, because it reminds me of that video where that cat is trying to fight, and the dog just comes over and grabs the cat by the scruff to pull it back 😭😭😭

not pandora being like: save it for the arena. she's FOUL for that one, but she's so funny to me, pls

sirius being confused about why james would even like regulus is HILARIOUS to me. he really was like, okay you're gonna have to make diagrams and pie charts to explain to me how this even happened. this poor man. he is So Tired. like, james and regulus are stressing him out so much at this point. if it's not one thing with them, it's another,

and now he has to deal with romantic feelings on top of everything else??? let him REST.

meanwhile, james is over here twirling his hair because regulus is pretty and mean to him and nearly gave him brain damage when he was fifteen. leave him alone, that snowball was his wakeup call and he's been wide awake ever since 😭😭😭

anyway, i really liked this chapter, if you couldnt tell. let me know your thoughts!!! i love all your comments so much and try my best to reply when i have the energy/time. thank you all so, so much <3

ill see everyone on THURSDAY

The Last Night

Chapter Notes

happy thursday!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death (in the past and also assumed to be in the future)
-brief description of violence
-brief description of murder (nothing too detailed, but explicitly stated what happened)
-references to torture (not explicit and only really hinted at, you might not even pick up on it)
-depictions of dissociation and dissociative amnesia
-reference to a pet passing away to old age (peacefully and only briefly mentioned)
-brief reference to a nightmare
-angst

that seems like a really bad list, but believe it or not, we also have humor and fluff in this chapter—even though there's some angst. enjoy?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dinner is a quiet affair.

Regulus isn't sure if it's tense because of the earlier interviews, or simply because it's the last day for him and James, or both. Pandora is the only one who speaks, really, but she quickly gives up on that when no one has much to say in response.

Sirius and Remus are making eyes at each other, which Regulus mostly ignores. Usually, it's sort of fun to see his brother turn into a complete idiot the moment Remus so much as *breathes* in his direction, but Regulus understandably detests any and all hints of romance right now. The source of this issue—one James Potter, of course, who barely lifts his gaze from his plate the entire meal and doesn't say one word.

Actually, James is the first one to leave, and he does so in a manner that's not like him at all. Without a goodbye, he just shoves himself out of his seat and leaves without looking back. It takes Sirius all of five seconds before he's up and following him, looking worried and a little sick.

Regulus doesn't want to be bitter, but he is, a bit. Of course Sirius would go to James, regardless of the fact that Regulus is literally in the same situation as him. Of course James would want Sirius' company over anyone else's, regardless of the fact that Regulus is surely feeling just like he is at the moment. That's how they work; it's always James and Sirius, and Sirius and James. Never one

without the other.

It feels like a bad omen, in a way. Vaguely, Regulus realizes the world wouldn't make much sense if Sirius and James didn't have each other. Going into the arena with James where only one can come out...this acknowledgement isn't a comfort. It's never been a comfort for Regulus, though, so he's used to it.

He remembers when he used to be so, *so* happy that Sirius and James were best friends. Funny how things change. But, really, not funny at all. Regulus hasn't laughed about it in years.

Pandora tries to get up and help Remus clean, but he firmly sends her off to bed, which is probably for the best. She's tired, and honestly, she might be the only one who actually gets some proper rest tonight, so Regulus figures *someone* should.

Regulus doesn't want to admit it, but he doesn't want to be alone right now. He doesn't want to go sit in his room and think about what's waiting for him tomorrow. He doesn't want to drown in his own thoughts. Mostly, he wants to avoid thinking for a while; he wants to avoid everything. So, he gets up and starts scraping plates without a word.

"You don't have to do that," Remus murmurs.

"I know," is all Regulus replies, because he's very aware that it's technically something Remus is only required to do. He doesn't care. He's doing it anyway.

Remus is silent for a long beat, then he says, "Really, Regulus, you can go rest. I can do this on my own."

Regulus lifts his gaze and just looks at him, the fork scraping slowly against the plate as he continues what he's doing. For a moment, Remus just stares at him, then he seems to realize that Regulus isn't budging on this, and he gives a tiny, singular nod—mostly to himself—and turns away without a word.

In silence, they work in tandem to grab the plates off the table, throwing food away. Regulus hates it, really, because this is food that could go to people who are very, very hungry in various districts. He never wastes a meal, and neither does James or Sirius, but...well, this is their last day. It doesn't leave much room for an appetite, so Regulus lets it go.

Regulus also helps Remus gather the glasses off the table, then just gives in and goes to help him wash dishes. If Remus is surprised by this, he doesn't show it. In fact, Remus doesn't say anything at all at first, letting them fall into a silent rhythm where Regulus washes and Remus rinses, dries, and puts away.

"I saw your interview, you know," Remus says, eventually. "I'm not technically supposed to watch, but I was already here, so I just… Well, anyway, you did very well."

"You saw James' too, I'm guessing," Regulus mutters.

Remus hums. "Yes, but I was assuming you didn't want to talk about that."

"Nothing gets past you, Remus," Regulus says dryly, and Remus snorts quietly.

"You don't have to talk about it. It's obviously complicated."

"Yeah, that's the word he used, too, but it's not really that complicated at all."

"No?" Remus asks.

"No," Regulus confirms. "I hate him. I hate him even more now, for involving me in a stupid lie that I wanted nothing to do with. He had no right to do that."

"Right," Remus says slowly. There's a long pause. Remus puts away a glass and comes back, his lips pursed when Regulus glances over at him. "I hope I'm not overstepping here, but if I may… I'm not so sure that it is a lie, and people can't—they can't help how they feel, Regulus."

"Don't compare what you and Sirius have going on to James and I. It's not the same," Regulus replies shortly.

"I...wasn't," Remus mumbles, and Regulus appreciates that he doesn't try to deny anything about him and Sirius. It would just piss Regulus off if he did. "It's just, well, when you're a servant with nothing to do but watch, you learn to notice things, and James looks at you. *Really* looks at you. A lot."

Regulus scoffs and scrubs harder at a plate, his face dropping into a scowl. "That doesn't have to mean anything."

"No, but I'm observant, and I've observed that it does." Remus reaches over to take the plate without warning, and Regulus huffs quietly under his breath. Remus seems to find this amusing, if the way his lips twitch are anything to go by.

"Honestly, this is the least of my worries right now," Regulus says shortly, shaking his head.

"I know." Remus blows out a deep breath. "I just don't think it has to be a worry for you, really. Rita practically tore James apart to get to what he was protecting, and that turned out to be you. He was sincere, Regulus, and it wasn't malicious."

Regulus turns that over in his head, because admittedly, he hasn't really—considered it. He doesn't know why, and he also does. But he was there. He watched the interview. He saw the way James looked, the pure fucking panic in his eyes as soon as he realized what he said, as soon as he realized what he *revealed.* James—of course he would never do something like that to be malicious; he literally announced to everyone that he had no feelings for Irene only moments before. He's sincere like that, about the things that matter, and feelings—people's feelings *matter* to him. Rita just cracked him like a fucking pecan, and Regulus wasn't prepared for him to be the other one that she used to do it. He didn't see it coming.

But, really, in the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter. It *can't* matter, so Regulus isn't letting himself think about it. He doesn't want to think about it, not when tomorrow is still going to come no matter what passes through his mind.

"I have more important things to focus on than what James may or may not feel," Regulus announces firmly, passing the last plate over. He reaches in to drain the water, staring at the suds that cling to his forearm. "It's not going to change anything in the arena anyway, so…"

Remus rinses the last plate, but he takes his time drying it. Regulus can feel him looking at him, so he slowly glances back. Remus murmurs, "Are you scared?"

Regulus stares at him, then arches an eyebrow.

"Right, stupid question," Remus admits wearily, shaking his head. "I just—I suppose I wanted to

give you the option of talking about it, if that would help."

"It won't," Regulus says bluntly. "Talking about the fear isn't going to magically make it go away. It's still there, no matter what's said about it."

"Yeah," Remus replies quietly. "Yeah, I know."

Regulus watches him, lips pressing into a thin line. "This is going to be hard for Sirius. Watching James be in danger when he can't do anything about it… He'll be a mess, Remus."

"And you."

"What?"

"Watching James *and you* be in danger, he'll be a mess. You're his brother, Regulus." Remus frowns when Regulus doesn't respond to this, and then he sighs. "I know this isn't going to be easy on him."

"You'll make it easier," Regulus murmurs, holding his gaze, and Remus swallows harshly. "You're important to him. I'm sure you've worked that out by now, but I'm telling you in case you haven't. Just—I can't make you, I can only ask, so I'm asking. Do you know what I'm asking?"

Remus nods carefully. "Yes."

"Will you, then?"

"I'll try."

Regulus nods, then turns and leaves without another word, feeling like he's smothering in the request he couldn't bring himself to voice out loud. *Take care of him.* It's always so hard to say, because it's never him that Sirius needs, but that doesn't stop him from wanting Sirius to be alright.

He's grateful that Remus heard him nonetheless.

~•~

Sirius remembers when James lost his first and only pet. A stray cat that had wandered through the Victor's Village for years, one that James had been feeding and bringing inside since he was a child. She was an older cat, and she had been around for years, but by the time James was seventeen, she was gone. The day he found her, peacefully gone in her sleep in a patch of sun, James had been a fucking *wreck.*

It had been alarming seeing James cry. Since they were eleven, Sirius had never seen James cry like *that.* He'd seen him cry from laughter, and he'd seen him cry while reading soppy books, and he was sure that James cried when he returned home after his time in the arena—even if he couldn't remember it. None of that was how he cried that day, raw sobs and horrible grief, so heavy that Sirius had been scared.

James hasn't cried like that since, until tonight.

It's as scary as it was then. Tonight, he curls himself up on his bed next to Sirius and cries with so much grief, so much loss, that it's a fight for Sirius not to cry right along with him. The one James is mourning this time? Himself.

That feels like some sort of cruel joke that the universe is playing on him. People don't get to attend their own funeral, and yet James has already made himself at home in his grave.

Sirius sprawls out on the bed next to James, listening to him weep with a shrill sound ringing in his ears that sounds like his own screams he keeps trapped behind his teeth. He says things, soft things, comforting things; he wraps an arm around James and holds him; he tries and tries to help, and he doesn't really do anything at all. There's nothing to do, and yet his hands ache to dig James up from his grave until his nail beds are so torn that they're bleeding.

Sirius breathes and thinks *I'll breathe life back into you,* because James isn't dead. He's not dead, and Sirius can't accept that he might be one day very soon. He doesn't accept it. To him, the grave is just a door, and Sirius refuses to close it.

James cries himself to sleep, and Sirius stays a long time after anyway, just watching him breathe. He can't drag himself away until James turns over in his sleep, and then Sirius buries his face into the pillow to muffle the choked sound that falls out of his mouth. He shoves it down, the rising grief and pain that threatens to consume him, because he has no reason to feel it. He doesn't accept

the reasons it would be there.

Sirius tugs the blanket over James, his lungs feeling like they're on fire, and then he leaves.

It's not late. Still afternoon, technically. James just exhausted himself with all the crying, and Sirius hopes he sleeps all the way through until morning, just for one last night of the last dredges of peace he'll get to have before the arena wrings it out of him for good. Because it will. Sirius can attest to that.

He's not surprised when he ends up at Regulus' door. For a long time, he just stands outside of it, not even sure if he can bring himself to go inside. He rests his hand on the doorknob, feeling oddly hollow. His mind buzzes dully, but nothing really sticks when it drifts through; it's like his thoughts are just pieces of paper fluttering along the wind, brushing past his fingertips when he tries to grab them, always out of reach.

Slowly, he turns the doorknob, his eyes shut as he eases the door open. He waits for Regulus to say something, but he doesn't, and Sirius understands why when he peels his eyes open. Regulus isn't in his room. The door to the balcony is cracked, and Sirius can just make out the shadow of his brother pouring in from outside the gap.

Sirius' memory of the past is really bad, but he still has issues with it in the present. His mind isn't —sometimes he can't get it to work right. It's not brain damage from the arena; he was medically checked over and cleared when it was over. He has physical scars from his injuries, but the mental ones never fully healed, and he doubts they ever will. It fucks with his memory a lot, sometimes even in real time.

Like now. Sirius blinks and finds himself at the door to the balcony with absolutely no recollection of how he got there. It's just—blank. He doesn't know if he walked in a straight line, if he stopped halfway there, if he skipped or ran or twirled in circles from one point to the next. And he'll never know. That time—that moment—is just *lost* to him now, and he knows he'll never get it back.

It's one of the most common aftereffects of the arena that has lingered in his life, even ten years later. It's gotten better, admittedly. He used to lose entire days, or hours, and not just moments. It used to happen frequently and without reason, no matter what he was doing or who he was with. James told him once that he acts no differently than usual, that he just carries on what he's doing, and no one can even tell that he's gone. It's like he's sleepwalking, but it's *sleep-living,* and it scares him each time he wakes up. It's different from the nightmares or hallucinations, because he's still *present* for them, but this? It's like he doesn't even exist when it happens.

Sirius exhales quietly, reaching out with a shaking hand to ease the balcony door open and slip outside. Regulus is curled up in a chair, his arms wrapped around his bent legs. His head swivels to watch Sirius move over to sit in the lone chair across from him, but he doesn't protest, or speak at all.

For a long time, Sirius doesn't speak either. He can't. He isn't sure what to say. The silence feels heavy between them, thick like quicksand, something they sink into the more they struggle. They've been struggling for so long now that Sirius doesn't think they know how to do anything else. You don't drown in quicksand; it suffocates you. There's a difference, and Sirius doesn't know which is worse.

Sirius feels like he's dangerously close to breaking down, but he can't let Regulus see that. Maybe it's messed up, because Regulus has lost it on him more than a few times when they were younger, but Sirius is supposed to see that, supposed to step in and be there to mop his face and hold him up when he can't do it on his own. That's not Regulus' job to do it for Sirius, because he's the little brother, the one who looks at Sirius and knows he's strong, steady, not someone who loses it.

It is, Sirius knows, really messed up. They're brothers, and the age gap isn't very big at all, and they're adults now. Older, wiser, capable of understanding what they just *didn't* as children. Regulus sees them as equals, and Sirius knows just how badly Regulus used to want to take care of him, just like Sirius took care of Regulus for so long, until he couldn't anymore. But Sirius just *can't.* He can't bust down that wall and shatter that illusion, because he's weak—he knows he is—but for Regulus, he gets to be strong. He can't lose that.

Sirius sucks in a rattling breath, his hands shaking, losing it. He's losing it, and what happens then? He never has, not with Regulus. What happens when he has no choice? *I can't help it,* he thinks, vision blurring. It hurts. Fuck, it hurts so much.

"I—I'm—" Sirius curls his hands into fists, his voice scraped raw, thin and reedy like it might snap in half. Regulus turns to look at him, just staring, and Sirius is too close to tears to see what his expression looks like right now. "If I could, I'd go so you didn't have to, Regulus. If I could—"

"But you can't," Regulus murmurs with quiet finality, like the final nail in a coffin.

"I'm sorry," Sirius rasps.

Regulus is silent for a long moment, and then he whispers, "I'm not. I think once was bad enough."

And Sirius just—he laughs, because yeah. Yeah, it was. It's the worst thing that ever happened to him, and he would do it again a hundred more times for Regulus. It fucked him up beyond repair, and he wouldn't go back to choose differently, even if it meant he got to be whole again.

"I wish—I really wish I could remember everything *before* better than I do," Sirius confesses as his laughter fades out. There wasn't any real humor in it anyway.

"You...don't?" Regulus ventures cautiously, clearly confused. Of course he would be. Sirius has never told him how bad he was, and he never let him see it.

Sirius clears his throat. "No, not really. I can remember some things, but not very much. Not as much as I should. And what I can remember, some of it isn't clear, or comes in this strange jumble, so I don't always know what was real or not."

"I remember," Regulus murmurs. "I can tell you if it was real."

It tugs at Sirius heartstrings that, despite everything—all that they've been through, and all the time that's passed—Regulus *still* wants to do the one thing that Sirius could never let him do. He knows logically that he's not all to blame; he was going through a lot, and Regulus was as well, and neither of them knew how to handle it. They should have never *had* to handle it, no different than they should have never had to handle what they did from their parents. Regulus grew bitter and cold and resentful; he pulled away and *stayed* away, giving up on Sirius just as Sirius was trying to learn to stop giving up on himself. Sirius didn't let Regulus in; he let the distance grow and never knew how to cross once it was there, because it was never supposed to be there. They put it there together, and only they can get rid of it by meeting in the middle, but they're different, and they've changed, and neither of them really know how.

Maybe this is a start. Maybe it's too late to start at all, and maybe they won't get farther than this one step, but Sirius thinks this one step might mean the world to both of them regardless. Maybe it's enough, or maybe it'll have to be, because maybe this is all they get to have, and maybe that's more important than having nothing at all.

"Did we ever…?" Sirius' face scrunches. "I have this sort of disjointed memory of—of glass shattering? But I wasn't scared, and it wasn't Mother or Father. I think—I *think* we were throwing bottles? Glass bottles. Is that—did we—"

"No," Regulus says softly. "No, that never happened, not with me. With Uncle Alphard. You used to go over to his house, and you'd both throw glass at the wall. He was raging and sloshed, but you—well, it frightened me. Made me uncomfortable. Mother always told us to stay away, but you

never did, of course. You would bring shards of glass back sometimes to use in something. You built me a dagger out of one once."

Sirius blinks rapidly. He doesn't—even with Regulus telling him, he doesn't *quite* remember, really, but it doesn't feel as distressing *not* to. The memory is still broken up, and Sirius doesn't remember Alphard there at all, but something in him eases to know what it is. All he'd known was that he wasn't scared, and he'd assumed that meant he was with Regulus.

"Oh," Sirius mumbles. "Alright, what about…? There's one where I *know* you're there, but I don't —I can't remember what we're doing *exactly.* You were young, but I can't recall how old you were, or even my own age. We were...chasing something, I think. Yeah, yeah, that's what we were doing, but we were laughing, not—desperate or anything. There was this—this house? A mud house. Like, a tiny one. I don't...I can't really remember much else, but was that—do you know what I'm talking about, or am I making that up?"

"I was nine, and you were ten. We were chasing a lizard, and I actually caught it, so you decided it needed a house to live in. It had rained, so the ground was muddy enough for you to build a tiny little house out of it. There were a few windows, I think, and you tried to build a door, but it kept falling over. We put the lizard in, no bigger than my palm, and it stayed for about...fifteen seconds, maybe? Yeah, just about, and then it darted out one of the windows and ran off," Regulus tells him. "You named it Lewis."

Sirius closes his eyes. With the details, the memory is easier to sort out and click into place, less fuzzy and distorted as it comes into focus. He doesn't know if it's because he actually remembers it, or because he can just picture it perfectly, but either way, it feels nice to have something solid.

"I have—I know it's impossible, but I have this memory of us jumping off the roof of our first house, and we flew. We were trying to touch the stars. Our stars. I don't even know if they were visible that time of the year, but I—I *distinctly* recall us doing it. Obviously we didn't fly, but...did we…?"

"No. We never even climbed to the roof, but we used to talk about flying to the stars. Me, you, Andromeda, Narcissa, Bellatrix—all of us. We all used to plan grand adventures along the stars and constellations we were named after, and Narcissa would pretend to feel left out because she didn't have one, but it wasn't real. They were older, so that was just something they used to do to entertain us, especially when they babysat us. It was like a little story they would tell us before bed, all the adventures we'd have in the cosmos."

A lump forms in Sirius' throat that he has to swallow down, because that memory—one that isn't even real—is so *vivid.* He's known for a long time that it's not real, because it's not possible. He and Regulus couldn't have leapt off of a roof and flew up to the sky with bright bursts of laughter, but it

rings through so clearly that he can feel the air on his cheeks and hear Regulus shrieking in delight as he soars through the sky.

Maybe it was a dream and he can't separate them from reality as properly as everyone else can. Maybe he took a story that his older cousins told them and turned it into a memory that feels more real to him than things he actually experienced. He doesn't know why it's there, and it's frustrating. The way his own mind betrays him makes him want to curl up in a tight ball and never move again. His past is so flimsy, so spotty in some places, and it's like he lost so much of himself that he can never really get back. He aches with the loss.

"Thank you," Sirius croaks. "For being honest, I mean."

"Do you remember the day we gathered pecans?" Regulus asks him, and Sirius frowns.

"No," Sirius admits. "Should I? Did we do that?"

Regulus sighs quietly. "Yeah, we did."

"You can—I mean, you can tell me about it, if you want," Sirius suggests. He won't remember, he knows that, but he'd like to hear about it.

"It's fine," Regulus says, looking away. "It's not a very happy memory anyway."

"We had them, though, didn't we?" Sirius asks, his voice soft as he drops his gaze. "Happy memories, I mean. Back when we were—the people we used to be."

"I don't know anymore," Regulus replies, equally quiet. "I don't really remember the people we used to be."

Sirius smiles sadly. "Yeah, Reggie, neither do I."

~•~

Remus knocks on Sirius' door, receives no answer, and decides to leave. It's sure to be a hard night for him, as well as James and Regulus, so maybe Remus shouldn't intrude. He doesn't think he would have dared to, if not for the conversation he had with Regulus only a few hours ago.

You're important to him, Regulus had said. The thing is, Remus knows that. Sirius has made that clear. Somehow, in just a handful of days, he's become important to Sirius. He hasn't been important to anyone in five years.

Sighing, Remus turns away as if to go, only to come to a halt when he sees Sirius heading towards him. His eyes are tired and red-rimmed, and yet he still manages a small smile when he looks at Remus. It's faint and flickering like a flame threatening to go out, but it is there nonetheless.

"Almost missed you," Remus comments as Sirius draws closer.

"Wouldn't want that. I have divine timing, then," Sirius jokes weakly, coming to a stop beside him, in front of his door.

"Are you alright?" Remus asks softly, then feels just as stupid as he did when he asked Regulus if he was scared.

Unlike Regulus, Sirius doesn't make it obvious how stupid of a question that is. He just says, "No, honestly, I'm not."

"I know, I'm sorry," Remus murmurs. "Can I do anything?"

"You're doing plenty already, right now."

"I'm not doing anything at all."

"You're here," is all Sirius says.

"I can't stay all night, but I would if I could. I only have a few more hours before I have to go back to my cell," Remus tells him with an apologetic grimace.

Sirius nods. "Alright. How do you want to spend them?"

"With you," Remus admits, feeling his stomach drop out from under him like he's just fallen from a great height. These wants he's learning to allow himself to have, they scare him and excite him in equal measure.

"Well, that works out quite nicely, because I want the same thing," Sirius replies, and despite everything, there's a blush on his cheeks and a tiny smile curving his mouth. "Do you want to come in?"

"Yeah, alright," Remus says.

Sirius holds his gaze for a moment, then opens his door and steps inside. He holds it open, waiting for Remus to come in before he shuts it. For a moment, Remus is overcome with the awareness that he trusts Sirius, even behind closed doors.

Utterly oblivious to the magnitude of such a thing, Sirius moves past him while blowing out a deep breath, muttering about changing. Remus watches him step into his closet, sliding the door shut. Slowly, Remus glances around the room, just standing awkwardly in place.

Remus has seen Sirius' room many times before, of course, but he doesn't really know what else to do with himself at the moment. A fond curl wriggles in his chest when he thinks about the fact that Sirius never leaves his clothes on the floor anymore. He folds them as meticulously as Regulus does now.

Right on cue, Sirius steps back out of the closet with his clothes he was previously wearing in a neat stack that he puts on the chair in the corner. He's changed into joggers and a shirt that appears soft, and there's no sleeves, the hem ending on his shoulders and revealing his upper arms. Remus isn't at all prepared for how toned they look, or the scar that spills out from his right shoulder, jagged like someone tried to slice him in a harsh arc but never got to finish.

"That's not even the worst one," Sirius says, and Remus' gaze snaps up to see that Sirius has caught him staring. He reaches up and pokes the scar with a snort. "The ever so lovely Jericho tried to slit my throat, but I dodged and got this instead."

"I remember that," Remus replies, because he does, if only vaguely. "You bashed his skull in with a

rock."

Seems like a lifetime ago, before he ever ended up in the Hallow. He did watch Sirius in his games. Everyone watches, and Remus was no exception before he became a servant. Back then, Sirius was just a boy on the screens doing things that churned Remus' stomach, even when he was so desensitized to it that he barely let it weigh on his mind. What would be the point? It happened the year before, and it would happen the year after. Remus knew even he could one day have to do it, if his name was called, but that's not how things went for him. Some would think he was lucky. They would be wrong.

"I did, yes. I remember that all too well." Sirius huffs a sardonic laugh. "Of all the things to remember… You know, I can't forget one detail of my time in the arena, and yet—" He shakes his head, lips twisting, then he looks at Remus with a tight smile. "If I'm honest, I was sort of hoping you might not have seen my games. I know you weren't a servant then, but…"

"No, I saw them," Remus confirms, and Sirius nods, looking away as he clenches his jaw. "It's—Sirius, it's alright. You did what you had to do to survive."

"I killed twelve people. I'm literally a murderer, Remus."

"Against your will. You didn't have a choice."

"I could have died instead," Sirius says, gaze foggy and distant, and there's a wistful quality to his voice like he almost wishes he had. It makes Remus' stomach cramp with panic.

"Well, I'm glad that you didn't," Remus tells him firmly.

Sirius glances at him. "You saw all that I did, what I'm capable of, and yet you still say that. I don't know how you can stand to be in the same room as me, honestly."

"You had no *choice,"* Remus says, and it's sharp like a whip cracking against wet concrete, and he would know. Sirius gives a harsh blink, his lips parting in surprise. Remus shakes his head. "What happened to you—it wasn't fair. You didn't *want* to go through all of that. It's not right that you were forced to *kill* to survive, and that's not on you."

"It's just…" Sirius swallows. "I don't know. I just hoped that maybe you hadn't seen me at my

worst."

Remus softens helplessly, and he takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Sirius."

"Yeah?" Sirius rasps.

"You see me at my worst every time you look at me," Remus whispers. "I wish more than anything that you could have seen me at my best, but this is what you get, and somehow it's still enough for you. Why would I feel any differently about you suffering at the hands of the Hallow?"

Sirius shudders out a deep breath, shuffling forward a few steps. He reaches out slowly, coming short of touching him, then he pulls his hand back and flexes his fingers. "I don't see what you think I see when I look at you, Remus."

"What do you see?"

"Something glorious."

Remus' breath catches. He steps forward, running his gaze over Sirius' face. "Why did you pull away? You were going to touch me, but then you stopped."

"Can I?" Sirius asks, and it sounds like a plea, like he's desperate for it. His eyes are wide, and his fingers twitch at his sides as he gazes up at Remus with hope etched into his face.

This idiot, Remus thinks fondly. *This lovely mess of a human being.* He shakes his head with a quiet huff of laughter, still remembering his conversation with James. Sirius won't cross boundaries, so Remus is just going to have to show him that the boundaries have moved. He lifts his hand and cups Sirius' left wrist with his right hand, briefly sliding it up just to watch the way Sirius' chest stutters on a sharp inhale, then sliding it back down to gently tangle their fingers together.

It feels momentous, this breach they've been so careful not to rush into, and yet it's also quite possibly the easiest thing Remus has ever done. He tugs on Sirius' hand very gently and tells him, "Yes, you can. I want you to."

Sirius exhales all at once, loud like he can breathe easier suddenly, and then he proceeds to shuffle forward to close the last bit of space between them and drops his head directly on Remus' shoulder. He leans into him with a deep sigh, his body relaxing into him; it's so simple for Remus to slide his hands up Sirius' arms and around his back, just to hold him.

"You're so warm," Sirius whispers.

"Mm," Remus agrees distractedly, too busy working up the courage to brush his fingertips over Sirius' hair where it spills over his shoulders. It's so fucking soft that Remus' brain briefly cuts out entirely, and his hands itch to delve deeper into the strands. "I like your hair, you know."

Sirius releases a quiet laugh against his shoulder, dangerously close to a damn giggle. Remus' lips twitch, and he tugs gently on one strand that he catches between the tips of two fingers. Slowly, carefully, Sirius' arms slide around Remus, looping loosely around his back—and, just like that, it's an embrace.

For a long time, neither of them speak. They just breathe and hold onto each other. Sirius' breathing is even and calm, and he's so relaxed that he's actually a little limp, like he could just drift off and fall asleep right here. His only movement is when he occasionally rubs his cheek against Remus' shoulder, as if settling in. Meanwhile, Remus indulges a bit too much, unable to stop himself. He sweeps one hand up and down Sirius' back, and the other is on a mission to get into his hair if it's the last thing he does. He manages it, eventually, finally working up from just playing with the ends or the random strand here or there that he curls around his knuckles. Instead, he gives in and cards his fingers through from root to tip, entranced immediately by the slip of silk-soft hair between them.

In response, Sirius gives a full-body shiver and turns to press his face more firmly against Remus' shoulder. Remus can still hear him breathing, noting the falter in it before it picks back up in a slightly uneven rhythm.

"Alright?" Remus asks.

"Mhm," Sirius responds, high-pitched.

"Do you want me to do that again?"

"I am doing everything in my power not to beg you to do that always."

"I unfortunately have other things I'm required to do with my time," Remus teases lightly.

Sirius grunts. "Cruelty. Torment. Utter misfortune."

"Isn't it just?" Remus' lips curl up in amusement as he once again pushes his hand through Sirius' hair. At this, Sirius' displeasure dissipates, and he gives a low hum of approval.

"That could put me to sleep," Sirius mumbles.

Remus thinks about that for a second, then says, "Well, you do need your rest tonight. I can—I mean, I can help with that."

"In bed?" Sirius' head pops up, nearly displacing Remus' hand, and he looks *very* fixated on this idea immediately. "You'll get in my bed? With me? I mean—I just—I'm not—if you, um—"

"Yes, to help you sleep," Remus says, amused.

"Well, you know, there's a lot of ways to—" Sirius stops all at once, coughing as he does that blush all over that Remus likes so much. He looks a little mortified. "Sorry, that was—"

"Are you ordering me to exhaust you in other ways?" Remus asks, arching an eyebrow at him.

It's almost comical how quickly Sirius pales, the blush completely draining from his face. "No! Fucking hell, no, I would *never."*

"So, you *don't* want me to tire you out?"

"No. Yes. I mean—I—"

Remus frowns at him, but he's barely hanging on at this point. In a moment, he's going to break. "Is there a problem with how I complete my tasks? Do you think I'll fail to handle this one to your

satisfaction?"

"My—my satis—what? Remus?" Sirius looks a little lost, and dazed. "No? I mean, I'm not asking—it's not that I—" He cuts himself off as soon as Remus' lips twitch at the corners, which means he's studying Remus mouth a little *too* closely, but Remus isn't complaining. Sirius' mild panic drains away until he's stunned. "Oh, you were fucking with me again."

"I was, yes," Remus confirms, breaking out into a smile as he rubs both hands down Sirius' arms as he starts to pull away.

Sirius muffles a quiet noise and reaches up to cup his forehead, exhaling shakily. "That's—you know, for something that scares the piss out of me, I find it *very* attractive. I'm not aroused by my fear, just to be clear. I think it's the mischief that does it for me, if I'm honest. Maybe...a little bit of the fear, but today is not the day for me to explore that."

"Thank you for taking me with you on that short journey of self-discovery," Remus says cordially.

"You make me feel things," Sirius informs him, gazing at him sort of helplessly, like he's lost.

Remus' lips twitch. "I noticed."

"Okay. I just—I wanted to make sure you knew."

"I know."

"Right. Are you still getting into bed with me?" Sirius asks.

"Yes," Remus says.

Sirius' lips tug up into a grin. "After all of that, I have to make you feel things too, if you're still willing to get in my bed."

"Come on," Remus tells him with a gentle laugh, reaching out to push him towards the bed, getting

an inner thrill from putting his hand on him again and *knowing* that he can. He slides his thumb along the scar on his arm, and Sirius barely walks straight because he's too busy gazing at Remus.

Getting into bed with Sirius is surprisingly easy, but maybe it shouldn't be a surprise. So many things with Sirius are easy, so why shouldn't this be as well? It's not proper, he shouldn't do it, yada yada yada—the same spiel as usual, and Remus just really, *really* doesn't care at the moment. Being with Sirius is always a risk, and it's one he's willing to take.

The bed is so much softer than Remus' cot in his cell, and he actually has *pillows,* as well as satin sheets and lovely duvets that feel so good Remus could weep. He doesn't really know how to relax into it, despite this, because he hasn't had anything even *close* to it in five years. Luckily for him, the goal isn't to get comfortable; the goal is to indulge in more of Sirius and his hair that Remus is admittedly fascinated by.

Remus ends up propped up on his side and one elbow, his other hand raised to run through the hair that Sirius has helpfully fanned out along the pillow like spilled ink. It's almost artistic, the waves of black against the stark white pillowcases, something sharp and ethereal all at once.

"Remus," Sirius murmurs, gazing up at him through half-lidded eyes.

"Hm?"

"Will you wait for me to fall asleep before you go?"

"If you fall asleep before I have to," Remus says softly.

Sirius hums and closes his eyes. "I want to fall asleep with you here. Is that strange?"

"No, I don't think so," Remus replies, because he'd desperately like to do the same. He can't. He'll never be able to.

"Thank you," Sirius whispers, his eyes still shut. "For being here for me, I mean. Tonight, especially. It's—it would have been so much worse without you, Remus."

Remus gazes down at him and keeps dragging his hand through his hair. Tenderly, he whispers back, "Of course."

Sirius releases a soft sigh, and it's not long before he genuinely drifts off to sleep, his mouth falling slack and his body sinking into the mattress. Remus continues to stroke his hair, marveling at the level of trust Sirius has in him, the same trust that Remus feels reverberating in him for Sirius. He stays right where he is until he has to go, wishing with every cell in his body that he could stay. The one reprieve is that Sirius got to fall asleep with him there, at least.

If Remus will never get to do the same, he makes sure to take a little something for himself before he goes. A tiny indulgence. He leans in and presses a kiss to Sirius' forehead, soft and lingering, letting it form into a smile as he pulls away.

When he leaves, even under his mask, his lips still tingle.

~•~

James jerks awake with his heart pounding and Sirius' name falling from his mouth in a rasp of pure panic. He sits up frantically, disoriented, searching for him—but he's not there.

It takes James a moment to realize that this is okay. That the lack of Sirius' presence doesn't mean something bad has happened. That Sirius is likely in his own bed, hopefully getting whatever rest he can. James exhales and hunches forward to rub his palms into his closed, gritty eyes. Sobbing oneself to sleep, especially whilst still wearing contacts, does not make for very happy, healthy eyes. Who knew?

Dropping his hands, James swallows past the lump in his throat. He hates that he did that. He isn't —he *doesn't* regret his choice, alright? The plan is still the same, and he won't change his mind, but...that doesn't make it easy. That doesn't mean he's not scared. That doesn't stop him from feeling like he's gagging on his own grief for the life he won't get to live.

James drags himself up to check the time—it's the middle of the night—and then goes to take a shower. He's sweaty from his nightmare, and he tries not to take the chance to be clean for granted.

Once he's finished and changed, James eases out of his room. Carefully, he moves up the hall to Regulus' room, intending to just check on him, maybe see if he's up. They haven't spoken since the interviews, and James feels the need to apologize. More than that, he doesn't want to enter the

arena with the weight of Regulus being angry at him on his shoulders.

He eases the door open cautiously, and the light is still on, but Regulus isn't in bed. The door to the balcony is cracked, just like last time. There's a brief moment of hesitation, and then James slips in, shuts the door, and heads to the balcony.

Regulus is sitting in the same chair as he was last time, a creature of habit. He's always liked his routines, his little made up rules of tidiness for how things should be, what goes where and how things have to function. When he unconsciously picks a chair, that chair is his. When he wears brown shoes, he needs black socks. When the streetlights come on, he has to pass through each golden glow of the circle on the ground on his route home. Regulus has always been comfortable with order in his life, while Sirius and James prefer spontaneity.

"Hi," James greets cautiously as he sinks into the open chair. Regulus doesn't acknowledge him, but James can see his jaw clench. "Er, have you slept at all?"

"No," Regulus answers stiffly. "Have you?"

"A little, but not very well," James admits.

Regulus exhales sharply and turns his head to look at James. In the wash of light that barges out here from the cracked door, his eyes are blazing. "What do you want, James?"

"I know you're angry with me," James mumbles.

"Yes, I am," Regulus snaps.

James swallows. "I'm sorry, Reg."

"I don't want your fucking apologies. I want you to not have done it," Regulus says harshly. "Of all the fucking things to do, to *say,* and you—and you *know* that was cruel—" His voice cracks, and he sounds brittle. He turns his head away, hand balled in a fist on top of the table. When he speaks next, his voice sounds small, and it breaks James' heart. "It was cruel. You had no right to mock me like that."

"I wasn't mocking you," James tells him. "I know why you would think that, but—"

"Do you?" Regulus hisses, his shoulders wrenched tight, and he sounds furious because of what he already knows.

James already knows, too. He's known since he was eleven and was introduced to Regulus for the first time, and Regulus had looked at James with wide eyes, like he was the most amazing thing Regulus had ever seen. He's known in all the moments after; when Regulus could barely string a sentence together around him; when Regulus blushed every time James smiled at him; when Regulus would race to beat Sirius to the door every time James came over, just to have a precious few minutes alone with him before Sirius stole James' attention entirely.

Of course James knew that Regulus had a crush on him all the way from eleven to fifteen. James knew, and he thought it was funny. He thought it was hilarious, in fact, and he sometimes even played into it with winks and playful comments, just because it amused him. Not because he cared. James didn't care, unfortunately. To James, Regulus was just Sirius' baby brother with a hopeless crush.

And then, well, Regulus abused him into forming a crush right back, quite literally hitting him over the head and telling him to fucking *pay attention,* which reoriented James so hard and so swiftly that he'd gone from not even thinking twice about Sirius' baby brother to daydreaming about what it would be like to kiss him. This abrupt one-eighty happened in just enough time for Regulus to do an abrupt one-eighty of his own, going from crushing on James *hard* to hating him just as fiercely. Isn't that terribly ironic?

"I know you had a crush on me once," James admits quietly, and he can't help but appreciate the blush that floods Regulus' cheeks, even when he's still pissed off.

"Yes, well, I was young and stupid," Regulus mutters with a scowl. "Not that it mattered to you anyway, and we both know it. For you, it was just a source of entertainment."

"You have no *idea* how long I've been kicking myself for being young and stupid in the exact opposite way. I had so many opportunities that I let pass me by, and as soon as I realized how fucking stupid I was for that, it was too late." James heaves a sigh. "No more opportunities."

Regulus is silent for a beat, and then he looks over at James with narrowed eyes. "You meant it, then."

"I didn't mean to tell literally everyone my deepest, darkest secret," James says dryly, "but having feelings for you was, in fact, my deepest, darkest secret."

"Deepest and darkest," Regulus echoes flatly, an eyebrow arching. "High praise. Very romantic. Should I swoon?"

James groans and reaches up to scrub his hand through his hair. "Just—fucking hell, Regulus, you know what I meant. Obviously I didn't want anyone to know, or anyone to find out like *that.* For one thing, Sirius didn't know. For another, I didn't want *you* to learn about it."

"Why?" Regulus challenges. "You knew about *me."*

"Yeah, I did, but—" James grimaces. "Well, it's shit, isn't it? As soon as I started having feelings for you, *your* feelings for me went away. What was I supposed to do with that, especially with everything that was happening with Sirius? There was so much, too much, and even when we learned to live with it all, there was no point. You fucking hate me."

"Yeah," Regulus murmurs, frowning. "Yeah, I do."

"See?" James tosses up a weary hand. "No point."

"There's even less of a point now, and yet you're still here."

"Well, the thing about feelings is, whether or not it's pointless to have them, they still sometimes persist anyway."

Regulus looks at him for a long time, no longer seeming angry, but his face is inscrutable. James shifts a little, feeling weirdly studied, like he's under a microscope. Regulus' gaze feels like a test, and James wants so badly to pass it, but he knows he can't when Regulus is the one grading him.

Slowly, Regulus pushes his chair back with an awful scrape, standing up. James instantly goes still as Regulus circles the table at a leisurely pace, moving closer to him. His heart races, because he—fuck, he doesn't know what's about to happen, but Regulus is coming *closer,* and he's doing so with the knowledge that James *wants* him closer than he's ever been.

"One of us is going to die in that arena, or maybe it'll be both of us, but *neither* of us have very good odds," Regulus says softly, pausing to lean against the table, one hand gently drifting back and forth along the edge.

James nods slowly. "I know. This is—it's our last night."

"It is," Regulus agrees. "Things are complicated with Sirius, I have murder and possible death in my very near future, and I've had no choice but to do a lot of thinking about who I used to be, who we all used to be. You're right, feelings persist, and my hatred for you isn't going anywhere. Ever. If I die, I'll do it hating you. If I live, I'll do that hating you, too."

"Even when—if I'm dead?" James asks, admittedly hurt by this, though he shouldn't be. He knew this already.

"Yes." Regulus holds his gaze. "I'll hate you for that, too."

"For being dead?" James murmurs, startled.

Regulus looks at him, and his eyes—those eyes, James knows them when he knows nothing else, and there's something about them now. Heavy and intense. "Yes, for being dead. Perhaps for that more than anything else."

James should not find that overwhelmingly romantic, as well as tragic, but his breath hitches in his throat anyway. It's so strange how Regulus' hate can feel like a benediction when he wields it this way. James never wanted it before, and now he's suddenly grateful for it. Hatred isn't apathy, or indifference, and James doesn't think he could survive those from Regulus. Hatred isn't love either, but it's dangerously close, and James thinks he could die for both. He's going to.

"We could be dead tomorrow," Regulus whispers, "and I don't want to spend my last night alone, even if that means I have to spend it with someone I hate." He lifts his hand off the table and holds it out, fingers spread and gently curling, an offering and a beckoning. "You're lucky, James. You get to spend it with someone you don't."

"What about the fourteen year old Regulus in you?" James whispers back. "Does he feel lucky, at least?"

"He doesn't feel anything at all. He's been dead since I was fifteen," Regulus replies with a brief smile that's sad around the edges. He wiggles his fingers a little. "Go on, I want to be young and stupid just one last time, so you should take your last opportunity before I change my mind."

James exhales shakily, the significance of it all not lost on him. He knows it's because they're going into the arena tomorrow, and everything will change, then. Regulus would never do it otherwise. But when you're trying so hard to outrun tomorrow, the only direction you can go is backwards. Regulus wants to go as far back as he can get, and in the distance behind him is a boy who once wanted someone who never took his hand when he offered it, but will now. Funny, how things change. Tragic, how some changes don't get to mean something.

James slips his hand into Regulus', his heart doing this weak, pathetic fluttery thing as their fingers slide past each other. Regulus holds his hand delicately, cupping it from the bottom as his thumb swipes tenderly over James' knuckles, like James is royalty and he's going to bow over his fingers. He doesn't, though. No, he just gives a gentle tug, encouraging James to stand up, and as soon as James has, he turns his hand to slot their fingers together before leading James in his room.

Ridiculously, James feels a little wobbly in the knees, just from the way their fingers tangle together, fitting in the crevices of each other like they were always made to be that way. James had thought that the first time they held hands, that fateful day in the courtyard while Sirius was attacked on the screen, and Regulus had threaded their hands together like he needed the contact to help him stop trembling. It didn't really work, but neither of them let go, even long after Sirius had walked away from the fight with a dead body in his wake.

Regulus turns off the light first, and immediately, the modifications he's made to his room with the Hallow tech and advancements offered to them become obvious. The ceiling is just the night sky full of pinprick stars that offer a faint, blue glow to the room from the midnight canopy above them. It's gorgeous, honestly, and James is admittedly distracted by it so much that he doesn't look away until Regulus pulls on his hand again, silently demanding him to get in bed.

It's almost like Regulus is that young boy with a crush again, calling out to James for his attention. Here and now, it's very different, because they're adults who are about to be in bed together when they never have before. James' mouth is dry as he follows Regulus under the sheets.

"Don't get any ideas," Regulus mumbles, like he can read James' mind, which did in fact have *many* ideas.

"Too late," James admits. This earns him a soft huff of laughter, despite everything, and he grins as he sinks down onto the pillow under his head. He's on his side, and Regulus is right across from him, looking at his face in the dark. They're both just looking at each other, but James is a brave soul, so he works up the courage to make a request for what he really, *really* wants, most of all.

"Can I hold you?"

Can I have you? James thinks, desperately. *Just for tonight. Please.*

Regulus doesn't answer him. Not with words, at least. He turns over, and James' heart starts to sink at the rejection, but then Regulus scoots back until he's pressing into the curve of James' chest and open arms. He shifts to share James' pillow with him, tugging his own up to his chest, then curls up slightly and rocks back more firmly into James like he's snuggling in. James holds his breath, not quite believing that this is actually happening.

He hesitates, but then he slips his arm over Regulus and relaxes forward with a soft sigh, eyes drifting shut at the sensation of actually getting to hold him. He's close, and warm, and apparently the little spoon—and James feels dangerously addicted to this already. He doesn't want to let go; he wants to stay right here forever, where he gets to hold Regulus and know what it's like to have him, even for a moment in time that can't last, because tomorrow is on its way, and it will catch up to them eventually.

But, for now, James curls up to Regulus and thinks that he was right, because here, like this, despite everything he has waiting for him when tomorrow comes, James knows he's lucky to get to spend his last night just like this.

Chapter End Notes

regulus and remus WILL be friends in this fic, don't you worry, but we gotta get there first. it's a slowburn friendship lmaooooo. i love them so much. remus is just like: so, like, are you scared about the whole "possibly going to die tomorrow" thing? and regulus is just like: 😐 and remus is like: you know what? that's fair. carry on, mate. HELP THEY'RE SO FUNNY TO ME THEY'RE GONNA BE SO SASSY WHEN THEY REALLY SETTLE INTO THEIR FRIENDSHIP I CANT WAIT 😭

meanwhile, sirius and james are being sad girlies 😔 nah bc sirius really said: james isn't gonna die, i simply Do Not Accept It. and he's so valid for that. the denial is strong with this one. me too, babe, me too.

and then the regulus and sirius angst had me like that meme where that reality star is like screaming and crying at the cat, you all know the one. me after writing every line: STOP, YOU'RE DONE, PUT THE PHONE AWAY. me @ me: leave them alone and let them rest 😭😭😭 also me: *writes more sad shit*

but the pecan story being one of regulus' happiest memories in the last chapter, only to find out that sirius doesn't even remember it at all, and THEN to learn that it's not a happy memory for regulus anymore because the Hallow essentially destroyed that for him??? im chewing on glass. ☹☹☹

on a high note!!! remus and sirius hugged 😭😭😭 no, sorry, they "embraced" bc sirius would feel like that's an important distinction. yes, he was practically levitating in that moment. FINALLY SOMEONE IS HOLDING THIS MAN HES BEEN SO STRESSED PLS. but they were unbearably cute with a little angst mixed in, as well as humor, because remus never misses a chance to fuck with people if he can. "you don't think i would complete this task to your satisfaction?" OH??? WHAT'S THAT MEAN, REMUS??? he's so sexy i love him 😊

anyway, cut to james and regulus, and it comes out that regulus used to have a crush on james, and james KNEW about it, but didn't care until it was too late. talk about tragic, right? on the bright side, regulus stowed away his Personal Issues for one night and was like: you know what, im could die tomorrow, so i will allow myself one (1) human indulgence of not spending my last night alone. go ahead, king, you be that little spoon! and james is just happy to be involved

that's a wrap, i think. i know many of you are eager for the arena (you fiends) and we are VERY close. SPOILER WARNING!!!!! (we're in the arena in chapter ten) OKAY SPOILER OVER!!!!

however, we DO get some action in chapter 9, in more ways than one. do with that what you will. chapter 9 will in fact come out on saturday.

IM UPDATING ON SATURDAY

okay, i think you all got it! anyway, that'll be all. thank you all so much for the comments and kind words, you have no idea how much i appreciate it. i hope you all have a lovely day and an even better tomorrow. <3

Lift Off

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

this is the point in the story where i remind all of you that this fic will get dark and people will die. it's heavy, heavy stuff, so PLEASE check the warnings, and don't hesitate to check the more in-depth descriptions i put in the end notes to spoil yourself if you need it, and also DO NOT READ if it's best for you not to. always, always prioritize yourself first. <3

warnings for this chapter:

-some sexy spice!!! (only semi-explicit, nothing too detailed, but you definitely know what's going on)
-angst (very, very heavy angst)
-references to torture (not explicitly described but most definitely stated where you won't miss it)
-references to death
-references/hints to possible future plans of suicide (basically stated, but nothing explicit, and no, it's not going to happen. it's not from a place of wishing to commit suicide, but rather from a place of grief)
-dissociation and a dissociative amnesia moment explicitly described (i will go in more depth about this in the end notes for more spoiler-y warnings)
-assault and murder (yes, there's death in this chapter, and i will go in more depth about this in the end notes for more spoiler-y warnings as well)

if it helps at all, the first half of this chapter is actually really, really nice and fluffy??? this is a common theme with me, im noticing. i lead in with a false sense of security, then BAM! sorry??? enjoy???

i will be putting very in-depth warnings in the end notes, but i will also be telling you how you can skip or just simply skim-read those parts, like to warn you in enough time so you can just quickly scroll by if that's something you'd rather do, which is valid as well!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius is only half-awake when he turns over and presses into something warm and solid, and usually, this would be strange enough that he would be in danger of responding defensively, but he remembers falling asleep next to something warm and solid, so it's perfectly fine.

In his sleepy state, warm and solid means something good, just like it did when he fell asleep, and so Sirius snuggles into it as he smacks his lips and tries to go *back* to sleep.

A beat later, Sirius' brain connects *warm and solid* to *Remus,* and his eyes snap open as he jerks up in alarm. It is, in fact, Remus. He's wide awake and looking at Sirius fondly, but Sirius' heart promptly *drops* as dread and panic sinks in.

"Did you fall asleep here?" Sirius rasps, his blood pumping as his heart races. "Remus, are you—"

"Sadly, no," Remus interrupts calmly. "I did leave last night, but I came back. I thought, since you wanted to fall asleep with me here, you'd like to wake up the same way."

"Oh," Sirius breathes out, relaxing all at once as his eyes drift shut and he settles back down. A moment later, it feels like his heart seizes in his chest when he realizes that Remus—he did this on his own. He chose to do this. He came into Sirius' room without asking and crawled right into bed with him, and if it was anyone else, Sirius wouldn't be giddy and delirious with joy about that. *"Oh.* I—yes, I do like it. Thank you. Hi."

"Hi," Remus responds, lips twitching. "You don't mind, then?"

"No, no, of course not," Sirius rushes to say. "You can do whatever you want, Remus, you know that. I mean, um, you *did* want to, right? You don't have to be here if you—"

"I wanted to. I want…" Remus' gaze flicks down to Sirius' mouth, lingering, then flits back up. "I want a lot of things."

Stupidly, the only thought that Sirius is capable of forming is *wait, no, I haven't brushed my teeth.* Fortunately, he doesn't say that, but only because the sole sound he's capable of making is a little high and garbled.

Remus' eyes soften from sharp to playful. "My compromise on my many wants was this, though. Watching you drool in your sleep. *Very* entertaining start to my morning, I'll admit."

"I do *not* drool in my sleep," Sirius sputters, reflexively lifting his hand to rub it quickly over his mouth.

"You do," Remus counters. "It's cute."

"Oh, well, in that case, I *do* drool in my sleep, actually," Sirius says, breaking out into a grin when Remus turns his head and stifles his laugh into a pillow. Sirius thinks he's so lovely, just gazing at him, and before he knows it, his hand is reaching up to gently push back where his hair flopped over his forehead. Remus turns his head slightly, peering at Sirius through his eyelashes. "Is this alright?"

"It's alright," Remus murmurs.

Sirius bites his lip, moving very carefully as he sweeps his fingertips across various strands of hair. His fingers shake from the importance of this moment, from brushing up against the glorious. He doesn't go too fast or too far, refraining from doing too much, no matter how desperately he wants more. Sirius breaks things, but he is *determined* not to break this with Remus—whatever *this* is.

He used to build things. Create things. And now he's lucky if he doesn't destroy what's already formed. This, with Remus, feels like building something, and it scares him. He never means to break things, especially what's important, and Remus is undoubtedly one of the most important things to come within reach of the ruin he carries in his palms.

Overcome by his own wariness, Sirius draws his hand away, swallowing thickly. A mixture of shame and guilt swirls in the gaping maw of his chest, making the back of his throat burn. Instantly, he feels the compulsive need to apologize, because he doesn't—he can never tell when he's genuinely done something wrong, or when he just feels that he has.

"Sorry," Sirius blurts out. "I'm sorry. I didn't even ask, and I shouldn't have just—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in firmly, and Sirius shuts up, gaze caught as Remus stares at him. He shakes his head slightly, then sighs deeply. "I won't break, you know."

"Just wait, I've barely gotten my hands on you yet," Sirius says.

"You can't break what's already broken." Remus quirks a tiny smile. "Besides, if breaking is the result of being touched by you, I won't be satisfied until I'm in shambles."

"Did—did you mean for that to sound as sexual as it did?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Oh, that's not fair. That's *dangerous.* You're dangerous," Sirius announces breathlessly. "You'll be the death of me. All that's tried to bring me to my end, and it'll be Remus Lupin and his poetic innuendos."

Remus chuckles, then proceeds to rock forward and roll right on top of Sirius, pushing him on his back on the bed with the weight of his body. Which—oh, okay. That's a lot for Sirius' brain to handle, honestly, and he briefly short-circuits. No, really, Remus might *actually* be the death of him.

Remus is. He's just. There's a lot of him, somehow, and he's literally just lying on top of Sirius, chest-to-chest. Sirius is under the thick duvet from the waist down, which thankfully keeps their hips from meeting, hopefully deterring his body from responding the second he actually gathers his wits about him. At the moment, he's frozen, staring up at Remus with wide eyes and staying very still.

"Touch me," Remus says.

"What?" Sirius chokes out.

"Touch me," Remus repeats, and ah, yes, Sirius did hear him correctly the first time. How he's still alive right now, Sirius has no idea, but he isn't surprised that he's struggling to breathe properly. He'll be dead soon, probably. Which is fine. What a way to go, really. "You need to get over this, Sirius. Or maybe I just need you to. I don't want you to hold back with me, so just—just touch me. That's all."

Sirius is so, *so* tempted beyond measure, like a bee drawn home to honey. Despite the destructive nature of his hands, he wants so badly, so selfishly, to put them on Remus anyway. Not only that, but Remus is *asking* him to, and there's genuinely nothing Sirius wouldn't give him if he wants it.

Slowly, Sirius lifts his hands and slides them up the sides of Remus' arms, flexing his fingers into the gray cloth that covers them, even though he should be gentle. He isn't sure if his hands know how to do that anymore, but Remus doesn't seem to mind, at least. He's just watching Sirius with half-lidded eyes, heavy and drooping like he's relaxed.

Easing up, Sirius gets to the shoulders next, feeling the broad line of them and up into the curve of his neck before pushing down to his upper back, pressing fingers into his shoulder blades, internally freaking the fuck out at the firm muscles under his hands. He drags back up and over,

breath stuttering as he slides his palms down Remus' collarbones, then his chest until it meets with Sirius' own. Again, he slips right back up to go back to each curve of Remus' neck, clamping down on his bottom lip as his fingers find their way up into Remus' hair.

Remus is watching him, still, and the lazy gaze is somehow *obscene.* It's like Sirius is indulging in some secret, hedonistic pleasure while Remus observes with mild, suppressed interest. There's no reason for it to seem like Remus is a voyeur when Sirius is simply *touching him,* and yet that's how it feels.

Helplessly, Sirius' fingers tremble as they rake through Remus' hair. He's fascinated by the feeling, and even more so by the way Remus' eyes flutter shut ever so briefly, his lips parting around a soft sigh. Sirius' stomach promptly erupts with butterflies, and his whole face goes hot.

"Why are you blushing?" Remus asks, low and amused.

"I don't know," Sirius mumbles, and he just *knows* he's blushing even harder now. "Just...you. This. It's intimate."

Remus hums. "Imagine how I feel. No one's touched me without causing me pain in five years."

"I would never hurt you," Sirius says immediately, an automatic response, reflexive and instinctive like breathing. He can inhale and exhale that promise; exist with it, like it's a necessity to life, because it is.

"I believe that," Remus murmurs.

Sirius feels his chest tighten, but in a good way, strangely enough. He ruffles Remus' hair gently. "Does it feel good?"

"It's calming, with you," Remus tells him.

They fall quiet as Sirius slides his hands out of Remus' hair and carefully drags his fingers down the sides of his neck before slipping to the front. He gently presses a thumb into Remus' Adam's apple, to which Remus dutifully hums, low and deep, so Sirius can feel the vibrations of it. Sirius' lips curl up, pleased, and Remus looks so endeared by him.

Next is the jaw and cheeks. Sirius cups the first in both palms, then cradles the second while tenderly brushing his thumbs under Remus' eyes. He keeps doing that, feeling a rush of emotion from the sight of Remus' face held in his hands. He's precious. He's lovely. He's glorious.

"Remus," Sirius whispers.

"Hm?" is Remus' equally quiet response.

"You're achingly beautiful, do you know that?" Sirius asks softly, running his gaze all over Remus' face. This means he gets to see in perfect detail how Remus' eyes flick down, his lips curving up, a bashful response that only becomes more apparent when Sirius *feels* Remus' cheeks heat up under his hands. A blush glows between his fingers, highlighting freckles that Sirius is eager to trace. "Oh, you liked that, did you? Who's blushing now, Remus, hm? Go on, tell me—"

Remus props himself up to reach around Sirius' arm, covering his mouth to muffle his teasing and breathless laughter. Sirius grins against his palm, using his own hands to gently push at Remus' (still warm) cheeks, making his face pucker a bit.

"Smug bastard," Remus grumbles as he moves his hand, but he doesn't go very far, leaving his palm cupping Sirius' cheek. There's a smile on his face, one he's trying to pretend isn't there, but Sirius has it caught between his hands.

"Let me have this. I'm always the one blushing. It's nice to know I can make you do it, too," Sirius teases.

"Is it?"

"My greatest achievement, honestly."

Remus chuckles and gazes down at him with unbridled affection, doing nothing to hide it at all. It makes Sirius melt a little bit, his insides turning to soup. He can't help it; Remus just makes him feel—well, everything, really. The whole spectrum of emotion, things that Sirius didn't even know it was possible to actually experience, and Remus can gift it to him with something as simple as a look.

"What?" Remus asks when Sirius huffs out a soft laugh.

"Oh, you have me all wrapped around your finger," Sirius informs him shamelessly.

"Is that so?"

"So it is."

Remus arches an eyebrow at him. "Are you only just working this out now?"

"You know, Remus, you could save a man the embarrassment of being so painfully obvious," Sirius mutters with no true heat to his words.

"There's no saving you from that, I'm afraid," Remus says solemnly, and Sirius laughs so much that he snorts inelegantly and shakes the bed as he wheezes. It can't be a pretty sight, frankly, and yet Remus gazes down at him and announces, "You're beautiful too, you know."

Sirius' laughter cuts out, already breathless when Remus steals his breath by saying so. It makes his heart flutter and his stomach swoop, a fuzzy feeling that's not at all unpleasant forming in the tips of his fingers, even where they're still draped over Remus' cheeks. He lifts one hand to carefully connect the distance between Remus' freckles under his eyes.

Remus' eyes are so lovely, brown like a sequoia tree and amber when the light hits it just right. Sirius remembers the first time he saw those eyes, the way it was like missing a step on the stairs, something inside of him *lurching*. Everything had stopped when those eyes locked with his, and it happens again here and now. Sirius feels that little lurch in him, like the ground just gave way beneath him, and he can't help but fall.

Not for the first time, Remus' gaze drops to Sirius' mouth, eyes glazing over, and then he's leaning in, and then Sirius is blurting out, "I need to brush my teeth," like the biggest idiot on the planet while his heart attempts to evacuate his chest right up through his fucking throat.

"You—" Remus blinks, some sort of clarity coming back to his eyes, then he starts laughing. He hangs his head forward, pressing it to Sirius' chest, forcing Sirius to sort of just cup his ears, mildly bemused. It takes a second for Remus to regain his composure, and then he lifts his head with a broad smile and sparkling eyes. "Right, of course. I'll let you go do that. I need to start breakfast

anyway."

Sirius' face is on *fire*. "Can I, um, help you with breakfast when I get out of the shower, if you aren't already finished?"

"You can come stand next to me and look pretty, how's that?" Remus teases, still grinning at him.

"Perfect," Sirius says with a snort. "Finally, something I'm good at."

"You're good at a lot more than that, but you *are* good at that, yes," Remus muses, sounding fond. He leans down with no warning and brushes a kiss against Sirius' cheek, just a faint pressure that's a blink-and-you-miss-it sort of thing.

Regardless, Sirius makes a humiliating sound in response and goes hot from his hairline to his navel, no doubt flushing more than he ever has. Remus has already drawn back, and the only smug bastard here is him. He looks very pleased with himself as he rolls off of Sirius and right out of bed, telling him oh so casually to meet him in the kitchen when he's finished.

As soon as Remus is gone, Sirius turns over and proceeds to bite his pillow, then muffles a scream into it for good measure. He's never felt so much all at once in his *life*.

He's also never been happier.

~•~

Regulus wakes up to a hand carding through his hair and a warm chest rising and falling under his cheek. Even before he's properly awake, he knows that it's James.

He knows James just by hand alone. By the time he was fourteen, he had memorized the shape of James' hands, just because James' hands felt like a brand every time he deemed to touch Regulus. There was *nothing* like James' hand on his arm when he was fourteen; he could have powered entire cities from the way he just lit the fuck up, the energy it gave him, how utterly *giddy* he was. James could touch him once, just casually, and Regulus would think about it for three days, revisiting how it felt, how it made him feel, over and over until the next time James did something else.

Regulus, to put it simply, was a pathetic teenager with a crush so painfully obvious that it could be seen from space. James knew. Regulus *knew* that he knew, even if it wasn't confirmed out loud until last night. They never said anything, but James would hint at it a few times when Sirius wasn't around, and Regulus would get helplessly flustered and shy, because back then, the scariest thing he could think of was James laughing at how pathetic he was. Then, well, Sirius went into the arena, and nothing was scarier than that.

Ten years later, and James' hands are different, much bigger now, but Regulus still knows them. He knows the way James' pinky curves, and the blunt, square shape of his nails, and the warmth carried in the crevices of his palms. The way they make him feel—well, that's different, too. Regulus isn't a pathetic teenager anymore, so he won't be powering any cities or running laps around the world, *but* he's a pathetic adult who pretends to be asleep for longer than he actually is just so he can keep basking in how unfortunately good it *still* feels.

There's also just—it's just, when he does drag himself up, the reality of the day is going to sink in, and Regulus isn't ready for it yet. Like this, with James, he gets to escape. It's safe here, with James' steady heartbeat under his ear.

"I know you're awake," James says, because he's terrible, and oh, right, Regulus hates him.

"No, I'm not," Regulus mumbles.

James chuckles, the vibrations of it against Regulus' cheek. It shakes him a bit where he's laying all over James' chest with little care to how he ended up there. "Oh, sure."

Regulus doesn't respond, keeping his eyes closed as he breathes in and out, trying to stay in this state of calm he knows better than to take for granted. He's helplessly grateful for the fact that James' hand still pushes through his hair in a repetitive motion, in the same exact pattern that matches the rise and fall of his chest. Honestly, Regulus could drift off to sleep again just like this, if he weren't so determined to feel every inch of how relaxed he is at the moment.

It's a bit pathetic that Regulus hasn't slept so well in—years, honestly, but especially not since his name was called. He hates that he slept like a fucking baby just because James was with him last night, all wrapped around him, holding on like he might never let go. He's still holding onto him now, in fact, his free arm looped over Regulus' back. He will have to let go eventually, but Regulus isn't ready for that either.

"Did you know," James murmurs, "you talk in your sleep?"

"No, I don't."

"You do. That's how I woke up. I was moving around a bit, trying to get comfortable, and you told me to piss off."

"Alright," Regulus says, "so maybe I do."

"Of course, when I *did* try to piss off, you rolled over and latched onto me like a limpet," James tells him, and Regulus can hear the smile in his voice. "I'd assumed you were kicking me out of your bed, but you were just trying to get me to stop moving. You're very grumpy, you know, even in your sleep."

Regulus grunts, refusing to be embarrassed by literally anything to do with James anymore. "If you don't shut it, I *will* kick you out of my bed. Literally."

"Adorable," James muses with a soft laugh, because he always has the audacity. "That's what you are. Just adorable—and clingy, too. I didn't really see that one coming."

"No."

"I can respect your determination to deny this, even while you're *literally* clinging to me."

"I hate you," Regulus announces with a heavy sigh, peeling his eyes open as he starts to shift away, as much as he despises it.

"Wait, wait, no, don't do that. Sorry, I'm sorry, we don't have to talk about it," James blurts out quickly, reaching out to drag him right back in, blowing out a deep breath when Regulus slumps against him once more. "I was just teasing, Reg, I promise. We can pretend it's not happening."

"Better," Regulus praises, settling back down.

"Just—if we *were* talking about it," James continues, because of course he does, "I would tell you that I really, *really* don't mind. Actually, I'm quite pleased about it, so—"

"James," Regulus snaps, shifting against him to raise up a bit and glare at him. This doesn't get the response he was expecting, honestly. He was prepared for apologies, or maybe a lazy grin, or further earnest commentary. He doesn't expect James to inhale sharply as he goes still, eyes slightly wide.

"You might want to watch where you're sliding your knee, love," James says weakly, a strain in his voice. He pointedly shifts his hips away as he reaches to push Regulus' leg down.

Regulus looks down, then looks back up, his face blank and his voice flat as he says, "Really, James?"

"I—well, *sorry,* but I can't help it," James sputters, looking flustered in a heartbeat. "It's just—you know, a natural bodily response, alright? I'm in bed with someone warm, and you smell really nice, and your skin is soft, and so is your hair, and it's—I mean, it's *you,* quite literally the person I've been daydreaming about since I was *fifteen,* so you'll have to forgive me for being...happy about it."

"You know," Regulus says thoughtfully, "there's some sort of poetic symmetry to this. I used to get off to fantasies about you all the time."

James' eyes sink shut. "Please don't talk about getting off."

"Hm." Regulus studies him for a long moment, feeling the shape of a mischievous thought take form in his mind. It's an idea, really. An indulgence, and frankly, he basically owes it to his fourteen year old self, who would have a fucking heart attack if he knew this would one day happen to him. Less than ideal circumstances, broadly speaking, but still. "It's just, well, believe it or not, one of my fantasies started just like this."

"Did it?" James asks, his voice low as he opens his eyes to gaze at Regulus, heavy-lidded. He can hear the shift in Regulus' voice, no doubt, the suggestive undertone to it.

"Mhm," Regulus confirms. "Me and you in bed together, only just waking up, our bodies close. Don't know how we ended up there, but to be honest, the details didn't really matter." He taps his fingers to the middle of James' chest, then starts sliding his hand down. James' gaze snaps to the

motion, tracking it. "Of course, it was always you touching me in the fantasy, because I was just a bit too shy back then."

"Less shy now," James mumbles, gaze locked onto where Regulus' hand slips further down his stomach.

"Well, you know, with experience comes less reasons to be shy," Regulus muses, fingers flirting with the edges of James' waistband.

"Experience?" James says, gaze flitting up. "With—let me guess, Barty?"

James says Barty's name with heavy derision. Regulus became close with Barty when he was seventeen, when they both tried to buy the same chicken from Mrs. Fibbs. They'd gotten into an argument over the chicken (Regulus was having a hard time, what with his brother moved out and avoiding him, and Barty is just always up for an altercation), and then Barty made a comment during the argument about Regulus having a pretty mouth ("I don't give a toss how pretty your mouth is, Black; *nothing* is making me give up this chicken," were his exact words), which somehow led to Regulus responding *very* suggestively ("My mouth could do things that would have you buying, killing, cooking, *and* feeding me this chicken, Crouch, so tread carefully," was his response), and *that* inevitably led to them trading blowjobs less than twenty minutes later.

All that is to say, they became fast friends. They'd dated for about two months, but it never seemed to work out, mostly because Regulus was dealing with too much to care about handling a relationship and Barty was too enticed by all the other people he could also be with to really give it his all. They came to a compromise that worked well for both of them, one in which they had sex when they wanted to, didn't when they didn't, and there were no strings attached.

Above all, they were friends. By the time they reached twenty-one, the sex had slowed down a lot, and they certainly don't do it as much anymore, usually just enjoying getting to spend time together as friends, too uninterested or lazy to get off together the way they used to.

James never liked Barty. Whenever he came around and Barty was there, he would get agitated. Knowing that James had (and apparently still has) feelings for him, that makes sense.

"Oh, yeah, we've done all sorts of filthy things together," Regulus admits, smiling sharply. "Jealous?"

"Yes," James says bluntly, holding his gaze.

"You poor thing," Regulus replies softly, clicking his tongue, and then he curls his fingers in James' waistband to snap it against his skin. James jolts a little, inhaling sharply yet again, and Regulus laughs quietly. "Like you never had anyone. You kissed a girl right in front of me when I was thirteen. Just about broke my heart, you did."

"Tracy," James murmurs, because of course he remembers the name of the first person he kissed at fourteen.

Regulus hums. "Yes, that one. And then you dated Renee when you were fifteen. I overheard you talking about what you did with *her* to Sirius. I handled that better, at the age of fourteen, sort of. Then, well, it was a while before you got with anyone else, I think, but then again, I wasn't paying attention."

"Ravi was next," James informs him. "I was nineteen, and I liked them a lot, just...not enough to get over you. Then there was Holly, then Saxon, then Wellis, then I gave up when I realized no one was going to make me feel the way I did when I caught a glimpse of you."

"Ran off with your heart, did I?"

"And didn't even look back. Return it, would you?"

"Mm, I don't think I will. I think I've earned it after all those years you spent holding onto mine," Regulus says lightly.

James quirks a sad smile. "I suppose that's fair. I should have been more careful with it while I had it. Maybe then I wouldn't be so empty-handed now."

"Poor, poor baby," Regulus whispers, tutting at him, and he once again pops James' waistband. This time, he dips the tips of his fingers inside just a small bit and eases them right back out, watching James take a deep, steadying breath. "Empty hands and unfulfilled fantasies; it's all very tragic, isn't it?"

"Just *tragic,"* James breathes out, catching his bottom lip between his teeth.

"That's us—a great, big tragedy," Regulus tells him. He dips his fingers in again, just a bit, and leaves them there. "Can't change that now, but the empty hands and unfulfilled fantasies—well, we can do something about those."

"What are you doing?" James asks, his voice rough.

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," James blurts out, "but I'd like to know *why."*

"I'll tell you when it's over," Regulus says, holding his gaze. James' pupils are blown. "Are you alright with that?"

James looks at him for a long moment, exhaling shakily, and then he gives a frantic nod. With that, Regulus pushes his fingers up James' chest to slip around the curve of his neck. Gently, he tugs on James, encouraging him to shift closer.

Regulus guides James' face into his shoulder at the same time he slots his thigh between James' legs. He can feel James' breath stutter against the curve of his neck, and one of James' hands reach out to settle on Regulus' hip not pressed into the bed, his fingers flexing and bunching up the soft cotton of Regulus' shirt. Regulus closes his eyes and turns his face into James' hair, sliding his free hand back down James' chest slowly as he carefully, with a practiced motion, grips James by his waistband and starts tugging to encourage his hips to move.

"Shit," James whispers breathlessly, his free hand snapping out to grab the front of Regulus' shirt, gripping it hard. His other hand tightens on Regulus' hip.

Regulus clamps his teeth together and forces himself to exhale slowly, a full-body shiver winding up at the base of his spine. He ignores it, because it's one thing to indulge his inner little idiot who was obsessed with any and all things James Potter, but it's something else entirely when it's affecting him in the *present.* James stopped affecting him when he was fifteen years old, and Regulus isn't willing to let that change now.

Because that's the thing. Regulus genuinely moved on from James, left all that idiocy over him in the past, and grew to hate him instead. That's real. It's not a lie; everything Regulus ever felt for James twisted and grew thorns, until this is who he is, unrecognizable to who he used to be.

Regulus takes comfort in that.

But, well, it *is* sex. He can't be blamed for responding. James is infuriatingly warm, and the quiet sounds he's starting to make sends a very naughty portion of Regulus' brain into overdrive. He bites down on his bottom lip *hard* to stay quiet, refusing to deviate from what he's doing. He breathes in and out, forcing himself to calm down.

"Mm, there you go," Regulus murmurs in approval the moment James' hips start shifting, fully just grinding against his thigh, which means Regulus can stop pulling on his waistband, making James work for it on his own. James groans into Regulus' shoulder, moving almost mindlessly, his breathing erratic.

"Fuck," James chokes out, and then he just—whines. Regulus squeezes his eyes shut as his mind turns to static, that whine the one remaining thing reverberating within his skull. That's *bullshit.* No one should sound that fucking good; that's just not fair. "I—Regulus. *Regulus."*

James says his name like it's the only word that has meaning. His voice is rough, and Regulus' name is sloppy and desperate in his mouth, like a hail mary or a form of salvation.

Regulus slips his hand under James' shirt, which would have been a dream come true once upon a time. Regrettably, he's still finding it to be fucking amazing, because James really *is* fit. Helplessly, he runs his fingers over James' skin, mapping out every bump and divot of James' stomach and chest.

James' hips twitch and curl, his fingers flexing on Regulus where they hold on, and then he's abruptly running his hands all over Regulus wherever he can reach. In his hair, over his shoulders, up his sides; he's greedy about it, desperate like he can't get enough. His head tilts up, mouth grazing Regulus' jaw, breath hot and stuttered against Regulus' skin.

"Regulus? Please?" James breathes out, and Regulus couldn't miss what he's asking for if he tried. James is really obvious about it, making his way to Regulus' mouth and waiting with what seems to be immeasurable restraint to kiss him.

Yeah, no, Regulus isn't doing that. He wouldn't kiss James Potter to save his own life, and he doesn't *care* how inviting James' mouth looks at the moment; it's not happening. The atmosphere is getting to him, obviously. It's the heat, the feeling of James' body against his own and under his hands, the soft moans that spill out of James' mouth. For fuck's sake, he sounds like *sin.* That should be illegal.

Regulus doesn't flat-out say no, but he doesn't quite say yes either. He comes up with a compromise for them both, one he's quite sure is safer than a kiss. He tilts his head and offers James his neck to attack at his leisure, mistakenly assuming that this won't have much of an impact at all.

That's *before* James takes the offering like it's a gift, tipping forward eagerly with a groan to get his mouth on Regulus' throat. He's so gentle about it at first, just soft and sweet kisses that Regulus can mostly ignore, but with each roll of his hips, he grows bolder. Regulus doesn't even notice it's happening until it's suddenly happening, and then James is lavishing at his skin like that's all he's ever wanted to do.

Obviously Regulus has had something similar happen to him before—Barty is a good lover, there's no denying that—but he'll be damned if James isn't just *better.*

Regulus has to catch his bottom lip between his teeth harder than ever to stay quiet, doing his absolute best to concentrate, and it's not fucking *working* because James' mouth is—his mouth is—it's really, *really*—

James muffles a groan into his throat, breathing hard as his hips start to stutter, and Regulus forces himself to shake it off and get back on track. He blinks hard and swallows, then slides his free hand up into James' hair, holding him in place as he slips his other hand from under James' shirt, raking his nails gently down James' abdomen as he goes, which earns him a full-body shiver. Humming, Regulus dips his hand into the front of James' trousers and pants, once again snapping his waistband against his skin.

James' hips jerk, pressing harder into his thigh, no finesse. Just eager in the pursuit of his own pleasure. He whimpers, and *really,* Regulus is going to need him to stop immediately and never do it again. He's never been so desperate to taste a sound before in his *life,* and he is not about to kiss James for anything in this world. Absolutely not.

"Regulus," James gasps out, pressing one trembling hand into Regulus' hair and dragging the other down to paw at his side, desperately trying to get him closer. "This feels—you feel—it's so good. I'm—I—"

"I know," Regulus murmurs. "Keep going. Don't stop. Fantasy fulfilled, and—well, our hands certainly aren't empty anymore. Come on, James, just one last thing."

"What? Anything. You can have—oh, *oh,* fuck." James whimpers and curls up, his fingers

tightening in Regulus' hair.

"You're already going to give me what I want," Regulus tells him, and James groans like he's been wounded.

"What? What do you—" James cuts himself off, going taut all over, choking out a moan that sounds a lot like Regulus' name.

"You're close enough as it is, and I'm just here to watch," Regulus whispers in his ear. "Show me, James."

"Shit, fuck, Regulus, *Regulus—"* James shows him, alright. He arches up and shakes all over, and Regulus begins moving his leg to work James through it, listening to James whine and gasp his name like a prayer.

Regulus doesn't stop until James is gasping for air, clinging to him and trembling as he goes boneless against him. For a moment, Regulus closes his eyes and turns his face into James' hair, breathing him in, and then he snaps his eyes open and pulls away, letting James fall back.

James spills out on the bed like a puddle, his eyes closed and his mouth slack as he settles. It takes him only a second to blink open his eyes, looking absolutely amazed.

"Fucking hell, Regulus," James breathes out in a croak, reaching up to shove a shaking hand into his own hair. He blows out a deep breath. "That was—it was—am I dreaming? Did that actually happen?"

"It happened."

"Why did it happen?"

"Because you might die today," Regulus tells him bluntly, shrugging one shoulder as he stands up. "Consider it a parting gift. Now, get out."

Before James can so much as respond, Regulus turns on his heel to go get his clothes and head off

to have a shower. He shuts the door behind him and locks it, waiting for the distant sound of the door to his room to be closed, signaling that James has, in fact, got out. Then, and only then, does Regulus turn on and climb into the shower.

Under the hot beat of water, Regulus takes himself into his hand and wrings out an orgasm so intensely good that he braces his arm along the wall and bites down on it to muffle the whimpers that spill out of his mouth. It's not a fantasy of James that gets him there, like it once would have been.

This time, it's a memory.

~•~

"James?"

With a jolt, James blinks and snaps his gaze towards Remus, who is pulling toast out of the toaster, the final touches of breakfast; a grand breakfast with nearly every option in the world available; the last proper breakfast James will have.

Remus is looking at him in what seems to be genuine concern, but there's no *surprise.* It's as if it makes complete sense for James to be distant and quiet, a little dazed and lost in his own head, as if it's perfectly fair and expected because of what's waiting for him today. The arena, more accurately, and that's definitely something that's going to weigh on James as soon as the reality of it gets closer and starts to sink in—but, really, the cause for his distraction is *Regulus.*

Perhaps it's stupid to be fixated on what happened, considering everything else he's going to be dealing with today, but honestly? James sort of prefers this. For one, it's certainly a more pleasant alternative—a little death is favored over a bigger, more permanent one. Though, if this little death Regulus has given—has gifted—to him is an omen of what's to come in the arena...well, James is well and truly fucked.

It's just—it felt so fucking *good,* and it was, to him, wildly confusing, but endlessly worth it, and even if he's still puzzling over it with whatever brain that didn't leak out of his ears, he doesn't need to fully make sense of it to know he's so, so fucking grateful that it happened.

He *is* puzzling over it, though. In fact, to him, it's a real head-scratcher. He just doesn't think that someone who hates him would do...that. Like, literally any of it, certainly not the way *Regulus* did

it, not even in a kind gesture of some sort due to impending doom. *A parting gift,* Regulus had said. Well, it was a lovely gift, but someone who hates him wouldn't be giving him a gift at all, not even if he was *actually* dying right in front of them. Regulus is a conundrum, honestly.

James just can't figure him out. He knows Regulus hates him; he's been dealing with that for years. He knows Regulus used to have a crush on him; he's been dealing with that for years also. But this? This is new.

James isn't entirely sure what to do, or think, about it. Hence all the spacing out, glazed eyes, and uncharacteristic silence. Nice of Remus to show that he cares, though.

"Yeah, I'm fine," James says reflexively, and he realizes belatedly that Remus is going to know that this is a lie, because there's no possible way he's fine today. He settles for something a little more honest. "I mean, not really, but it hasn't...hit me yet, I think."

"It's not going to," Sirius announces as he sweeps into the kitchen, and James immediately drops his gaze for...so many reasons. For one thing, he's scared to look at Sirius, because if Sirius shows even the least bit of upset on his face for what's to come, James will fucking lose it. For another, Sirius' little brother just got him off less than thirty minutes ago, and James isn't planning on telling him, mostly because he's going to die soon enough, so he can get away with taking it to his grave. Oblivious to all of this, Sirius continues to speak as he moves in the room. "It likely won't hit you until you're about to go up, or maybe until you actually get up there. It didn't hit me until the countdown finished and the cannon sounded."

Carefully, James picks his gaze back up, letting it crawl higher until he can see Sirius move past Remus, a hand pressed to the small of his back as he goes by. The touch is visibly light, but not hesitant, and Remus' lips curl up. Did they…?

Well, maybe—despite everything—they've all had a nice morning. James isn't going to think about it too hard. Instead, he's just grateful for what's *clearly* good developments for his best friend. He doesn't need to know the details, since it won't really matter anyway, and he's not sharing his own very good developments either. Just—good for them. All of them.

On the last day before everything changes for good, James is so fucking thankful to have something positive to cling to.

"What's going to happen?" James asks, bravely looking at Sirius' face, relieved to find that he looks —calm. Sort of. It's a facade, James can tell, but it's one they can both use to ignore what's really underneath. "Right before, I mean."

Sirius exhales as he pours himself some juice. "Is Reggie up yet? I want him to hear this."

"He's in the shower," James says, then snaps his mouth shut so violently that his teeth click together. Sirius' gaze flits to him, latching on to study him, and James tries so hard not to fidget or shift restlessly. He ends up doing both, and Sirius slowly puts the juice aside, tilting his chin up as he arches an eyebrow at him. "Um. It's—I mean."

"Why," Sirius says slowly, with the dramatic pause and everything, "do you sound so sure about that?"

James could lie. He could say he just walked by Regulus' room, paused to poke his head in, and heard the shower going. It would be easy to let the words slip past his lips—except it's *Sirius,* and James would feel so guilty about it, and Sirius would see right through him anyway. James just stares at him, utterly defenseless in this moment, and the only thing he can think to do is look to Remus for help, almost instinctively.

Remus—oh, Remus is a fucking *angel,* is what he is. He shifts rather abruptly and slides his hand up Sirius' back in a would-be casual way, if not for the fact that Sirius immediately straightens up with a sharp inhale and focuses right on him, distracted in an instant. Easily, like he doesn't have a care in the world, Remus picks up an apple slice off the plate of fruit on the counter, holding it up to Sirius' mouth.

"I sprinkled a bit of cinnamon on some of these, just to see if it would be good. Try it for me and tell me what you think, would you?" Remus asks lightly.

"I—what?" Sirius rasps.

"I want your opinion," Remus tells him, holding the apple slice closer, a tiny smile on his face.

"Oh, I—from your—you want me to—" Sirius genuinely can't seem to string a sentence together, the poor thing, and Remus just puts him out of his misery by nudging the apple slice forward, gently resting it against his mouth. Almost like a reflex, Sirius bites into it, the crunch making him jolt, and then he blinks as he chews. His eyebrows are furrowed when he swallows. "Oh, wait, actually… Remus, that's *good."*

"I thought they might be," Remus muses, looking pleased, and he pops the remaining piece of the

apple slice in his mouth, chewing it with a twinkle in his eye.

Sirius makes a noise, quiet and muffled. James tucks his lips in and ducks his head, struggling not to laugh. Remus Lupin. If there's one good thing to come out of all this, it's him.

"Oh, lovely, we're all here," Pandora announces in what is obviously forced cheer as she comes into the kitchen, Regulus trailing after her without a word.

James wouldn't be able to stop himself from looking right at Regulus if he tried, but he doesn't bother to try. It's sort of invigorating that Regulus is already looking back, not shying away from his gaze in the least. The exchanged look feels charged, at least to James, like they're both thinking of what happened this morning at the same time, a silent acknowledgement that James can feel like a tangible touch. It's warm in the kitchen, and James still shivers.

Remus clears his throat. Loudly. "Good morning, Pandora, Regulus. Sirius was just about to explain something important, but he was waiting on you, Regulus."

"Sorry," Regulus says, not sounding sorry at all, "I was in the shower." Sirius purses his lips, darting a glance towards James, but he doesn't comment. "What's this about?"

"I asked what would happen. Like, right before the arena," James explains.

Sirius heaves a sigh. "You'll both be with me until you have to go. They'll lead you into a Hallow heli-carrier and fly you off, then you'll be in separate rooms. No one close to you can be with you in there. Someone will come in to inject a tiny device in your arm that tracks everything to do with you. This means your vitals, your position in the arena, things such as that. It will hurt, just a bit, but you'll forget it quickly. They'll leave, and someone will speak over an intercom to tell you to get changed in the clothes provided for the arena. You'll have a few minutes, ten at most, and then you'll be instructed to step into the tube that will close behind you and raise the platform you're on to take you right into the arena. Do *not* step off that platform before the countdown finishes and the cannon sounds, or you'll be blown up."

"What if I trip and fall off of it?" James asks, eyes wide.

"Don't," Sirius replies, lips pressing into a thin line.

At the uncomfortable silence, Pandora clears her throat. "I'd like to be there with you as well, of course, but I have to go home for a few days, so I—I won't get to see either of you off. But that's—it's alright. I'll have breakfast with all of you before I go. Let's just—let's have a nice breakfast together, yeah?"

James' heart breaks a little at the quake in her voice. She's trying so very hard to sound light and unaffected, but it's clear that she's very emotional at the moment. Pandora does a lot for them, almost as much as Sirius, and James has come to appreciate her—more than that, he's grown fond of her. She's warm and kind and funny, and she gets a little fussy sometimes because she obviously cares about them, and it's blatant just how much she cares about them now. She looks like she's about to cry. The smile on her face trembles.

They do make an attempt to have a good—last—breakfast together, possibly just for Pandora's sake. But, sadly, at the table is an unwelcome guest; the unspoken knowledge of death that hangs over two of them. Pandora chatters nonstop, praising Remus for the food, talking about meaningless things like if she stops, she'll never find her voice again. Sirius barely eats, mostly just having the apple slices. Regulus and James likely wouldn't eat either—hard to have an appetite when time is running out—but Sirius insists that they tuck in.

"You need to eat for your strength, and for running, and for—a lot things," Sirius mumbles. "Trust me, you'll wish you had."

So, James and Regulus eat. Despite the fact that James is overly aware that this is the last meal he'll have outside of the arena, he can't bring himself to enjoy it at all. It tastes like ash that coats his teeth and leaves an acrid burn in the back of his throat. It's hard to swallow each bite and harder still to keep it down. He forces himself, though, closing his eyes and wishing with everything in him that he was back home, eating the warm and hearty soup that his parents would make for him or Sirius when they weren't feeling well. *Mum, Dad, I'm not feeling well,* James thinks and struggles not to throw up.

By the end of breakfast, silence has fallen, and no one's eating anymore. Pandora is staring down at her half-empty plate with a thick sheen of tears over her eyes. Yet, they do not fall. She takes a steadying breath and pushes to her feet, and everyone follows suit to see her off.

At the door, Pandora turns to James and reaches out without warning to cup his face in her hands. It's a startlingly gentle gesture, and for some reason, it makes James feel smaller. She's shorter than him, almost comically so, but he abruptly feels no bigger than a child standing before her.

"I am—" Pandora's voice catches, and she pauses to release a shaky breath, sliding her hands down to grip his shoulders. "James, I am so grateful to know you, and so sorry that I had to. Every name that I call is a name I wish I never learned. Yours—you—will remain etched into my heart

forever."

"I forgive you, you know," James murmurs, watching her eyes shine with more unshed tears. "I know better than to shoot the messenger, Pandora. You've been so kind while delivering it."

Pandora swallows harshly and tugs him into a fierce hug. In his ear, she whispers, "I know what you're going to do, James. For them. For Regulus and Sirius—and yourself. You are so, so brave. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

James' eyes sink shut, and he tucks his face down against her hair, inherently comforted by her preemptive grief. It feels like he means something, like his impact on the world and the people in it carries weight he can be proud of. She squeezes him, and he squeezes her back. Her hair smells like lemons.

As she pulls away, James wonders how she knows. Sirius and James haven't breathed a word of it, and he knows neither of them ever would. Pandora holds his gaze as she draws back, and she gives him a tiny, watery smile. James returns it, suddenly sure that it doesn't matter how she knows. Maybe she's known for some time now, working it out herself, and she won't put a name to this, not daring to speak it. She's the reaper. When she speaks of something with a name, death follows, and he's so grateful she's not encouraging this to die.

When Pandora turns to face Regulus, he shakes his head and says, his voice tight, "No. Don't. There's no need."

"I know," Pandora says softly, and Regulus looks so startled by this. She smiles. "I'll see you again soon, Regulus."

Regulus' breath hitches, his eyes widening before they dart to James, like he can't believe she just insinuated what she has. That Regulus will be back, that he'll win, and James will not. No one, not once, has outright said anything of the sort.

Pandora reaches out and grabs Regulus' hand, squeezing it only for one second, and then she drops it to turn and pull Sirius in a hug. She holds him for a long time, even longer than she held James, and no word passes between them, but when she cups his cheek, he nods and she nods back. Lastly, Pandora breaks the somber mood by facing Remus and asking if she could hug him too, so he won't feel left out.

Remus agrees with a quiet huff of laughter, possibly only because it's lightening the mood, making James chuckle and Regulus' lips curl up and Sirius' eyes—previously devoid of any spark—light up in delight. Pandora hugs Remus, but doesn't linger very long, which seems to keep him at ease.

After Pandora leaves, they don't have very long at all. Remus goes to clean up the kitchen, and Sirius just sits with James and Regulus in silence as they wait. None of them can really bring themselves to say anything.

There's far too much to say to even try.

~•~

Sirius wants to rewind time, selfishly, to this morning when he and Remus were in bed together, when Sirius hadn't let himself think about what this day was, when—for the first time in a long time—he let himself be happy, unhindered.

Time continues on anyway, a cruel mistress that won't let up. Here he stands before his best friend and little brother just moments before they will leave him to go face down death, and he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't know where to start.

There's too much with both of them.

James. *James.* James, James, James. His best friend. The air in his lungs. The one he needed when nothing else would suffice. The one who helped him when living was the hardest thing to do. If not for James, there would be no Sirius now, and it still feels that way. Even on the brink, Sirius can't let himself accept it, what James plans to do. He thinks it doesn't matter, in the long run. No James equals no Sirius. If he stops breathing, all the oxygen will dry up in Sirius' lungs, and he won't ever take a breath again.

Regulus. Reg, Reggie, his baby brother. His heart, and all the fractures in it. The one he would have gladly died for, and proved so. The one he lived for, even when it came at the cost of remembering how to live at all. They have too much between them, and at times, not enough. It all went wrong, and Sirius wishes with everything in him that they could make it right, but he doesn't know if they'll ever manage to. Ten years ago, Sirius returned with a broken heart, and he learned to live with that. If Regulus' heart stops beating, the fractures in Sirius' heart will crack too wide, and it'll never beat again.

"Regulus Black."

It's some sort of horrible irony that Regulus' name is called first to be taken away. Sirius' hand snaps out immediately to latch onto his arm, holding onto him as he holds his breath. Regulus looks away from the Auror waiting on him to look at Sirius instead, pale and wide-eyed. He looks so scared, so small. Sirius' little brother. Always his little brother.

"Sirius," Regulus whispers, his voice a mere breath.

And Sirius can't let him go. He can't. He. It's not working. He knows he has to; he knows how bad things will be for all of them if he doesn't, but he can't peel his fingers away. His grip on Regulus is desperate, bruising, and he can't let go.

The Auror steps forward, hand on their gun on their hip, and James steps forward as well, snapping, "Give them a moment. For fuck's sake, that's his brother."

James could be talking about either of them. As much as Regulus is Sirius' brother, Sirius is Regulus'. An equal exchange. An instinctive, familial possession. It's in their blood; that simple truth. *Mine.* James puts his body between them like a shield, like he'll protect that truth with sinew and bone. His back is to them, and Sirius has never felt so scared and so safe all at once before.

"Sirius," Regulus says again, more frantic and distressed this time. He's shaking, and Sirius knows how to do this, how to put everything aside, his own fears and needs, just to comfort his little brother. To be steady and strong for him.

"It's okay. You're going to be okay," Sirius rasps, his voice thick, and he tugs on Regulus' arm to pull him into his own. They haven't hugged in ten years, but Regulus folds into him like ten years haven't passed at all, like he's still just a child slumping into the safety of his brother's arms.

Regulus' voice is small when he chokes out, "I don't want to go."

"I know," Sirius croaks, his eyes squeezing shut as he cups the back of Regulus' head. The confession wrenches at his chest, making him feel like he's being ripped in half, because he can't take his brother's place this time. "I know, Reggie."

"I don't want to die," Regulus breathes out, the words muffled into Sirius' shoulder. That doesn't

stop them from being soul-shattering. Regulus is clinging to Sirius just like he did when he was fifteen and it was Sirius who was leaving. He'd said the same things then, too, just for Sirius. *I don't want you to go,* he'd said. *I don't want you to die.*

I won't, Regulus. I promise I won't, Sirius had vowed, and then he didn't. He refused. Sirius shouldn't make the same promises for Regulus, because he has no way of knowing, and yet.

"You won't," Sirius tells him anyway. "I promise you won't."

"Regulus Black." Again, the Auror makes their demand, and it's clearly the last warning.

A shuddering breath escapes Regulus, and he's abruptly ripping himself right out of Sirius' arms. Sirius tries to grab him again, unable to fathom letting him go, but Regulus jerks away. His face is like stone, and he looks at Sirius for only one moment, just a mere breath. In that breath, Sirius thinks *I love you,* and he can't make the words leave his mouth on an exhale before Regulus is walking away with the Auror.

There's never enough time.

They had ten years, and still, that wasn't enough.

"Sirius," James says gently, turning back after watching Regulus go. They'd stared at each other until Regulus took the corner, not looking away even once.

"James," Sirius practically whimpers, and in the next second, they're grabbing onto each other to embrace so tightly that it hurts, gripping each other so hard that Sirius can't breathe.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Sirius," James whispers, and Sirius' breath is snatched right out of his lungs, because he knows exactly what James is apologizing for.

James hasn't, not once. He hasn't apologized for his choice, for leaving Sirius, for *deciding* to die and never come back to his best friend. But he is now. There's so much remorse in his tone that it sounds like he's choking on it, and he is sorry, he's so blatantly sorry for what he's going to do, and that—

That makes it real.

Sirius has no choice but to accept it, then. It bears down on him all at once, and he breaks immediately, as soon as he lets himself feel it.

It feels like dying.

Sirius has brushed up against death many times, so he's aware of how brutal it can be. He's wielded death like a weapon, and he's been on the verge of death enough to know that it's not peaceful. It's blood and gore and pain. It's terrifying.

Not James, not James, not James, Sirius thinks desperately, and he'd offer himself up instead, if he could. *Me. Take me. Please don't take him. Please, not James.*

A sob works its way out of his mouth. James is still chanting his apology, saying it over and over and over, but never—not for a second—wavering in his decision. Sirius grasps at him harder, like he's trying to crush him, like he can grind him into dust and cup him in his hands and swallow him down as if he can keep them together that way. James is gripping him just the same, like he's trying too, and Sirius wishes it would work.

And, if Sirius has to accept it, if he has to face it— *my best friend is going to die, James is going to die, he's not coming back*— then the next logical conclusion is that Sirius will simply join him. No James, no Sirius. That's it.

Somehow, Sirius can live with that, until he's dead. Until they're dead. He can accept it that way, like a universal truth, something unshakable, more embedded in this world than the core of the earth. Regulus—he can live on without them, and has. He will live on. This is Sirius' only compromise.

Still. Even still, Sirius' instinctive defiance fights it, pushing at it with feeble hands. *Not James, not Regulus, not me. We'll live. Somehow, somehow, somehow...*

The will to survive is a fickle thing, isn't it?

"James Potter."

Sirius chokes on a raw sob, holding onto James as hard as he ever has, and then—

It's all gone.

Sirius blinks, sucking in a sharp breath as he stares around the hall, utterly alone. A broken whine falls out of his mouth, because no, *no,* that's not fair. His last moments with his best friend—and he can't remember them. They're lost to him.

No.

No.

No, please.

James was just in his arms. Sirius had him. Sirius was holding onto him. Did he try to keep him? Did the Auror have to rip him away? Did James say something? Did Sirius?

He'll never know.

And again, like a snapshot, Sirius stops when he blinks and finds himself walking. Gritty-eyed, face tight with tear tracks, he's moving, and he doesn't remember when he started or where he was trying to go. Sirius stumbles towards the wall, hyperventilating as he squeezes his eyes shut and—

"Sirius."

That's Remus. His lovely voice, so soothing, calling to him. Sirius blinks, and Remus is right there, right in front of him. When did Sirius make it back to the suite?

"I can't remember," Sirius says, his voice cracking. "Remus, Remus, I can't—I can't remember. I can't—"

Remus' hands reach for his face, and then—

Sirius is on the settee, pressed into Remus' side as he weeps into his shoulder. The screen shows Rita, her mouth moving, no doubt performing the usual introductions before the games that take place before they start—things like recapping information about each tribute and getting the excitement up for the arena, as well as what's about to happen inside it. She's muted, though, the tiny speaker with a line through it in the corner of the screen making it obvious.

Remus' arms are around him, holding him, one hand gently carding through his hair while the other sweeps up and down his back. Sirius feels like he's reentering his body, and as always, he's struck by the horrible thought of what occupies it when he's gone. No one ever knows that he's left.

When Sirius lifts his head, Remus' hand in his hair lifts away to cup his cheek, gaze flicking over Sirius' face. Softly, he says, "There you are."

"What?" Sirius croaks, blinking swollen eyes.

"You were gone for a bit, I think," Remus murmurs, as simple as that, and Sirius feels his heart stutter in his chest.

Sirius exhales shakily. "You—you could tell?"

"Yes," Remus says, eyebrows pinching. "It's alright, Sirius. Just breathe. You're here. I'm here; I'm right here."

"I don't know how I got here," Sirius admits, choked up, his eyes stinging again. "I can't—I don't remember. I—"

"Shh, it's okay. Breathe," Remus instructs gently, ducking his head forward to press their foreheads together, thumb swiping along Sirius' cheek so tenderly that he starts crying again.

It's a soft, steady sort of crying, though. From the eyes and not the chest. They just spill out, and he shuts his eyes, feeling his wet, clumped eyelashes against his cheeks. Every time Remus' exhale spills over his mouth, Sirius inhales. In turn, he exhales every time Remus breathes in. It's an exchange, guidance, and he falls into the gentle rhythm until it doesn't hurt as much.

Sirius feels himself become more solid around the edges, no longer a spector to his own life as he lives it, flitting in and out with no comprehension of what he's missing when he's gone. He doesn't get it back.

He'll never get it back.

~•~

James looks up from where he's slipping into the jacket provided for him, Sirius' last words ringing in his ears. The sound of the door takes his focus, and he feels himself start in surprise as Fabian comes sweeping in.

"You're here. How are you—" James sucks in a sharp breath of pure disbelief. "Fabian—"

"Special permission from Riddle himself, apparently," Fabian cuts in with a smile, winking at him as he moves over. "What, you didn't think I was going to let you go into the arena looking anything less than your best, did you?"

James releases a choked laugh. "I—I don't really think it's going to matter how I look."

"I know," Fabian says, softening as he reaches out to brace his hands on James' shoulders, just gazing at him.

"Why…?" James swallows and licks his lips. "Why would Riddle let you in to see me?"

Fabian hums. "Well, honestly, likely as an incentive. A little gift, if you will. You and Regulus really made *quite* the impression between your outfits and your little love story. You're both fan-favorites now, so the pressure is on to keep you two going for as long as possible, hoping some magic will happen, so to speak. I believe I'm here to boost morale."

"So, they—they're planning to milk us for all we're worth, then?" James mumbles, easily reading between the lines.

"Indeed they are, and indeed they will," Fabian murmurs, not bothering to lie to him. He slips his hands down and shuffles close, dropping his voice to a whisper as he fiddles with the front of James' coat. "But you're worth more than they could ever get out of you. You're the sun, James. Don't forget."

Following Fabian's glance down, James sees a small, bronze pin in the shape of the sun, a circle with triangles wrapped all the way around its outline. James reaches up to rub his thumb over it, then looks up. Fabian winks at him and zips his coat.

"Thank you," James whispers.

"The sun always comes back up, and so will you," Fabian tells him, then drags him into a hug.

James closes his eyes and hugs him back, his chest aching, because Fabian will never get to see him again after this.

"James Potter, step on the platform," comes a voice over the intercom, the same one that instructed him to get dressed.

It makes James jump a little bit, his heart racing as his anxiety spikes, sharp fear sliding down the ridges of his spine. Fabian squeezes him tighter for just a moment, and then he pulls away, giving James a nod of encouragement.

Swallowing thickly, James walks over to the platform, hesitating only a moment before stepping up on it. As soon as he's in, the tube slides shut, locking him inside. As soon as that happens, the door bangs open, and a flood of Aurors come in all at once. James sucks in a sharp breath, then releases a shout that reverberates off the glass and right back onto him as he watches, trapped and useless, as the Aurors beat Fabian to the floor. Fabian crumbles, curling up, and James bangs on the glass, begging them to stop.

They don't stop. They just keep hitting him with their batons, making his body jerk, his face twisted in a grotesque tableau of pain. He gets hit in the face and immediately slumps like all of his strings have been cut.

"Fabian," James breathes out, hand on the glass as he stoops down, trying to reach for him even when he can't. It doesn't look good, but Fabian is still breathing. He's still—

An Auror pulls their gun from their hip, points it directly at Fabian's head, then pulls the trigger. The sharp crack of the gunshot is loud, and James flinches away, freezing as his back hits the glass behind him.

Blood trickles from Fabian's forehead. From the bullet wound. One hand is stretched out, slack on the ground. He was trying to reach out for James, too.

The Aurors drag Fabian's body from the room, and James stays crouching on the platform, trembling so hard he can't breathe.

~•~

Regulus knows he's supposed to sit and wait, but he keeps pacing, turning his gaze to the platform he'll have to step onto soon. His stomach lurches with the thought. He doesn't want to do it. He wants to go back to being in Sirius' arms. He wants to go back further, back to when he had James' steady heartbeat under his ear. He wants to go back even further than that, back to his fifteenth birthday, or any time before then.

The door opens, making him whirl around, and Regulus' breath punches out of his chest when Gideon comes strolling in with a smile, eyes sparkling.

"Gideon?" Regulus whispers, hushed and reverent.

"There's my favorite doll," Gideon says softly, moving closer. "Don't you dare bite me for what I'm about to do."

What Gideon is about to do is, apparently, tug Regulus right into his arms. Regulus doesn't bite him, doesn't even fight it, because he's so scared and he doesn't want to be alone.

"How are you here?" Regulus asks in a rasp. He doesn't hug Gideon back, can't really bring himself to; it doesn't feel right, if Sirius isn't the last person he held onto. He lets himself be held, though, and Gideon doesn't seem to mind.

"Parting gift from Riddle himself," Gideon murmurs, pulling back with a small furrow between his eyebrows. "It's—it isn't really—when the request was made, Fabian and I instantly agreed; we jumped at the chance, if I'm honest. But now I'm thinking...it wasn't exactly a request. I'm here for

a reason, Regulus, and I don't know if it's a good one."

Regulus gazes up at him, heart thumping hard as his blood immediately starts rushing faster in his veins. "What? Gideon, what does that mean? What's—"

"I don't know," Gideon admits, "but that's not what you need to worry about right now. You need to be focused, alright? Listen to me, Regulus, you can *win.* I know you can."

A lump forms in Regulus' throat, and he jolts a little when Gideon unzips his coat just a little. It's lightweight, but there's some sort of thermal material on the inside that suggests it's going to get cold in the arena. Regulus really hopes there won't be any snow. If Gideon is removing his coat—

Oh. Gideon is not removing his coat. Regulus glances down to see a bronze pin under his fingers, shaped like a star. Slowly, Gideon zips his jacket back up, smiling gently when Regulus looks back up to meet his gaze.

"Be a champion anyway," Gideon reminds him quietly.

"Regulus Black, step onto the platform."

The instructions steal Regulus' breath, and Gideon steps back with an encouraging nod. There's something on his face, in his eyes, an undercurrent of unease like something isn't quite right, but it's clear that he's trying to hide it, focusing on Regulus instead. He looks like he has a headache.

Cautiously, Regulus walks over to the platform, repeatedly glancing back to see nothing but support from Gideon. It's that support that manages to get Regulus to step onto the platform, and the tube shuts around him instantly.

A mere breath passes before the door opens again, and Regulus freezes as Aurors come in the room in waves. Gideon doesn't miss a beat, picking up the chair in the corner and slamming it to the first Auror who dares to come too close. He fights, and he fights hard, but he's quickly overtaken. They strike him over and over with their batons until he's a heap on the floor, and Regulus watches in horror, not even breathing.

He doesn't so much as twitch until a gun is drawn, and then he throws himself forward, shouting, "Wait! Wait, no, ple—"

Regulus doesn't even get to finish begging before Gideon is dead. Blood pools onto the floor, a small puddle left behind as the Aurors drag his body away without so much as a stutter.

Regulus is left there, frozen in place as tears gather in his eyes, his throat going tight, and then it can't matter, because t he platform starts to move.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming to check the end notes for more in-depth warnings and where to skip:

Starting with the suicide implications: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHERE JAMES APOLOGIZES TO SIRIUS AFTER REGULUS IS TAKEN AWAY BY THE AUROR!!!

If you DON'T want to skip, but you still want the spoiler-y warnings (which is valid): Sirius sort of feels it finally hit him that James is planning to die and never come back, and he has the thoughts that he will just die with him, rather than live without him. It's not explicitly stated how or anything like that, but he makes it very clear that he plans to die if James does.

The dissociative amnesia: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN JAMES AND SIRIUS START HUGGING AND JAMES' NAME IS CALLED, AND DON'T STOP UNTIL IT SWITCHES BACK TO JAMES' POV!!!

If you DON'T wish to skip, but you want the spoiler-y warning (which is so valid): Sirius essentially gets too overwhelmed/upset and loses moments/blocks them out. His memory goes very spotty, and he comes in and out, like snapshots where he finds himself for a moment, then goes right back out. He is upset and panicking through this (it's mentioned once that he's hyperventilating), and he manages to make it back to the suite where Remus is, but he doesn't really remember how he got there. It's very, VERY upsetting for him. Remus does comfort him, but it's explicitly stated that Sirius will never get those memories back that he lost.

The death: FIRST, IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN JAMES IS INSTRUCTED TO GET ON THE PLATFORM TO GO TO THE ARENA, AND THEN WHEN IT'S REGULUS' POV, JUST STOP READING WHEN REGULUS IS INSTRUCTED TO GET ON THE PLATFORM!!!

If you DON'T wish to skip, but you want the spoiler-y warning (which is so valid): Two people die this chapter. Fabian and Gideon. It's explicitly stated that they are beaten down to the ground and then shot by Aurors. It's violent, but mostly brief. Both James and Regulus see this happen and are extremely upset about it.

for those of you who HAVE finished the chapter:

how we feelin'?

whew, talk about a rough one, right? i mean, it STARTED out good. sirius and remus got handsy and flirted with each other, which was fun. also, sirius blurting out that he needs to brush his teeth when remus tries to kiss him is so fucking funny to me. he PANICKED 😭😭😭 poor babe. he was really overwhelmed as it was, leave him alone.

meanwhile, regulus gave james a little treat. he's foul for that lmaoooo. he really was just indulging that person who used to have feelings for james and giving james a nice little parting gift because hey, he's gonna have to die if regulus making it home, so like. it's the least he could do. see, he can be nice sometimes.

james was like: you know what? im not even gonna question it. im gonna accept this fortunate stroke of luck and cherish it. 😭😭😭 he deserves nice things, really. very happy for you, king. it's what you deserve <3

the rest, though? fucking awful. 😒 gonna find the bitch who wrote this and put them through a meat grinder bc he's a little shit. the fuck was that???

listen, i love angst as much as the next person, but this one genuinely took a lot out of me, and it somehow still gets worse??? like, the story can and will get heavier from here, im not joking. not exactly in the same way, at least not always, but still.

honorable mention to pandora, who just Knows Things. i love her so much, you have no idea. her saying goodbye HURT

sirius and regulus clinging to each other before regulus goes into the arena? sirius not being able to let him go? sirius reassuring him the same way he reassured him when it was him going into the arena? sirius not getting to tell regulus he loves him? i would rather shoot myself with a nail gun, thanks.

sirius losing his last moments with james had me regretting all my life choices that led me to this moment. like, that shit was so sad. and the way he blanks things out in moments of high distress? yeah, ive been there. it hits hard, ill just say that. also yes, sirius did say something to james, but no i will not be telling you what it is because it's relevant later for more angst. feel free to make your theories, though!

and finally, fabian and gideon. ow. that was fucking brutal. rest assured, their deaths will not be brushed under the rug. it's actually a Very Important plot point. but still, that shit HURT.

also, side note, because im evil: james was indeed right, fabian WOULD never see him after that.

another side note, because again, im evil: gideon had a headache because fabian died first.

okay, im done now. next chapter is the arena!!! i will be posting on Tuesday again! give you all a little break before then!

IM UPDATING ON TUESDAY

okay, im gonna go hide now.

The Arena

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death
-references to previous deaths that took place
-actual deaths (we're in the arena now, so this makes sense, but it's not too detailed. only just mentioned, really)
-depictions of characters being afraid/anxious/panicked (but no in-depth descriptions of panic attacks or anything like that)
-very brief physical fight (it doesn't last last long and is quickly cleared up)

that's...it, im pretty sure. like, yes, we're in the arena, but this is actually a fairly mild chapter, despite that. enjoy! :)

EDIT: ive been meaning to share this playlist with all of you that i made for this fic (and actually use as i write), so if any of you want to listen to it—you have that option! it's here: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4YIqI2Odqo23il9MJRA5cY?si=4nIjeDIpTVynQJHACKLFrA&utm_source=copy-link

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Regulus notices is the sun.

It's warm on his skin, bright in his eyes, making him shudder at the temperature change and squint as he holds up his hand to block his face. The sound of the gunshot still rings in his ears, and the image of Gideon's dead body feels seared into his mind. Why? Why would they do that? Because of—Regulus?

There clearly was a reason for Regulus to see it. They made *sure* he would see it. To disorient him? To send him to the arena in a state of hysterics? It's working. Regulus is still shaking, his breath coming out choppy, but Gideon…

He'd never want Regulus to let them win.

Regulus thinks he knows. There's something… The outfits, the interviews, the impact he and James had on the Hallows… Of course Riddle didn't like it. This was a warning. But *why* Gideon? Why...? It doesn't completely make sense. Regulus can't figure it out, but he can still hear Gideon's voice in his head, telling him to focus.

Inhaling sharply, Regulus can taste the salt in the air. Iron. It makes his teeth ache slightly, and he swallows thickly, his heart thumping along with the large countdown that hangs in the sky in the distance. Big, large numbers that glow, a gamemaker's voice counting down at a steady, sedate pace.

26, 25, 24…

A large field is stretching wide and far in front of Regulus' platform. In the middle of said field is a cave—a big one with a large opening, like a mouth threatening to swallow anyone who gets too close. There are poles with bags and supplies hanging off them scattered in front of the cave, but inside the cave are the weapons.

17, 16, 15…

In front of the poles, before anyone would be able to reach them, there's a wide river that cuts through the entire field. It arcs off in a circle, like it's wrapping around the cave. To reach the cave, they'll have to cross it. The water is red, stark red that flows like blood. A crimson river.

9, 8, 7…

Swallowing, Regulus swivels his head, trying to breathe as his gaze darts around. The platforms are spaced apart, but it doesn't take him long to find James at all. He's hunched over, breathing hard and looking like he's about to vomit. Like he can feel the weight of Regulus' gaze, James turns his head and looks at him. Their eyes meet.

3, 2, 1…

The cannon sounds, and Regulus is running before he even realizes it. Everyone else is, too, he's sure—but he can't focus on that. Running to the weapons first thing is exactly what Sirius said *not* to do, but the poles are scattered far enough that Regulus can snatch a bag and run directly into the woods surrounding the field on all sides.

Regulus is fast. Very fast. Likely faster than most, and yet there are others that still manage to beat him there, which turns out to be a blessing in disguise. There's a loud splash of water, a scream, and then the cannon sounds again.

It's so unexpected, so abrupt, so *quick* that Regulus stumbles and falls to the ground before he ever reaches the water. Again: *BOOM!* People are screaming, and Regulus pushes up on his hands, breathing hard as he looks over to see Mulciber catching Avery by the chest to stop him from going into the river. Someone else—one Regulus doesn't know—isn't so lucky, and their momentum propels them into the water.

Immediately, pale hands break forth from the river to claw at them, yanking them down as they cry out. The scream cuts off, and it takes a minute, and then the cannon sounds again.

Three dead already.

Frantically, Regulus whips his head around, searching for James, trying to see, to make sure of the three, it wasn't—but James is there, scooping Vanity up with an arm right around her stomach, snatching her back and whirling her away right before she goes careening into the water. They stumble and fall, and then Vanity launches to her feet and starts sprinting to the right, towards the forest. James follows.

"There's something in there!"

"Don't touch the water! Don't fucking touch the water!"

"How do we reach the weapons, the supplies?!"

In that moment, the widespread panic feels almost—unifying. None of them are above it, and for just a second, the first instinct everyone has—even the death eaters—is to keep everyone from stepping into the water, panicking about how they're all going to survive if they can't reach what they need. It lasts only a moment, and then it's utter mayhem.

Fights break out, and people start to scatter. Regulus is among them. He's a target, and it won't take long before people start hunting him down, weapon or no weapon. He would prefer not to be beaten to death, thank you. So, he turns and runs as hard and as fast as he can into the forest. To the left.

He crashes through the foliage, struggling a bit on the terrain. It's uneven ground, littered with the branches and rocks and dry leaves. Trees blur all around him as he bobs and weaves, his mind utterly silent, heart racing and thighs burning as he pushes himself to run. Keep running. Always

running away. Run, run, run. Don't stop, don't stop, don't—

Regulus darts around a tree and collides into someone so hard that he legitimately goes flying, as does whoever he hits. He lands on the ground with a thud, his breath knocked out of him, and he hears the grunt opposite of him. The sound spurs him to his feet, scrambling to get up, and he freezes as soon as he has.

Evan stands to full height, breathing hard, his gaze sharp as their eyes lock. For a moment, neither of them move, or speak.

And then, "Regulus."

"Evan," Regulus replies shortly, a level of caution in his tone. There's a rock in between them. Either of them could lunge for it at any time, and yet, neither of them do.

Regulus shouldn't hesitate, but he isn't going to kill someone who isn't trying to kill him. The problem is, he doesn't know if Evan will try or not. They're not—it's not like they ever agreed *not* to, like proper allies or something. A few conversations and one laugh hard-won isn't exactly a contract signed in blood.

"Some river, eh, lover boy?" Evan asks lightly, holding his gaze. Regulus tries not to grimace at the moniker. Lovely. If he dies being called *lover boy,* he's going to be *pissed.*

"You saw it, then," Regulus says slowly.

Evan nods. He takes a step back, carefully. "Oh, I saw it. Puts a bit of a strain on everyone getting what they need, doesn't it?"

"I'd say so."

"If you ask me, it doesn't make sense."

"What?" Regulus mutters, admittedly a little baffled that they're just—standing here, talking, not...doing anything.

"They wouldn't put all those prizes out there for us if there wasn't some way for us to get to them," Evan points out, and Regulus...can't really argue with him there. "I have an idea."

"An idea to...get to the supplies?" Regulus asks.

"Yes." Evan is silent for a beat, and then he takes another careful step back, like he's waiting to see what Regulus will do. Regulus doesn't do anything. "I have a proposition for you."

Regulus narrows his eyes. "Do you?"

"I think I know how to get to the supplies," Evan says, not reacting to his suspicion. "If you help, I'll help you get to them, too."

"And why would you do that?"

"I'm generous."

"For some reason, I find that hard to believe," Regulus retorts, and Evan breaks out into a grin. It's boyish, playful, but not faked. Regulus *still* doesn't trust it. "Why me?"

Evan waves a hand lazily, like they're old friends just having a lovely little chat. "Oh, because you're the first person I came across, honestly, and you're not actively trying to kill me."

"Yet," Regulus adds.

"Well, I have to work with what I can get," Evan drawls, shrugging a shoulder. "Looks like that's you, lover boy. So, if you're willing to make a truce, I'm willing to get a dagger in your hands. How does that sound?"

Regulus sits on that for a long second, thinking about it, and then he sets his shoulders. "What do I need to do?"

~•~

Vanity stumbles over her feet and hits the ground, weeping quietly, and James backtracks quickly to reach out and grab her hand. He holds onto it as he pulls her back to her feet, and they're both running again, her small hand held in his grip.

James isn't—he isn't thinking, really, just *reacting.* Vanity is so young. She's only fifteen, and she's scared. She nearly died; the river nearly took her. If not for him, she'd be dead right now.

Fabian's dead body keeps flashing in his mind.

James couldn't help him. He'd wanted to. He'd tried to, and he couldn't. *Fabian,* James thinks. *Fuck, I'm so sorry.*

There's a harsh tug on his hand, weight pulling him to a stop, nearly making him trip. He whirls around, and Vanity looks up at him through her tears and says, "James, please, I—I can't. My legs hurt. I can't breathe. I—"

"Okay. Okay, hey, let's just—" James takes a steadying breath, his own body sore from all the running. He's already thirsty. Squeezing Vanity's hand, he looks around warily. "I know you're tired. I know that, and I'm sorry, but we don't—we can't stay out in the open like this. We have to keep moving."

"I'm scared," Vanity whispers.

"I know," James whispers back. "Me too." Maybe that's not reassuring, or maybe it is, but either way, Vanity seems calmer now after the small break. "Listen, we'll find somewhere to go, somewhere to take a break, and then—"

And then? And then *what?* James' brain seems to stutter over what comes next, what he's meant to be doing, unable to think past the next few seconds unfurling before him. His mind is already too full, a litany of *Fabian, Regulus, Vanity, river of blood, Regulus, three dead already, run, hide, Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.*

"Water," Vanith says, drawing him out of his own head. She squeezes his hand. "We need to find a source of water, and I don't really think the murder river back there is a good idea. Just saying."

James blinks at her, then huffs out a startled laugh. "Er, right. No, that's—yeah, bad idea, you're right. Okay, we'll find somewhere, and then we'll work on finding water."

"That won't murder us," Vanity adds.

"Right, that," James agrees, lips curling up. "Ready to run?"

Vanity nods. "Yeah, I'm good now."

So, they run. They're not pushing as hard this time, and Vanity isn't stumbling anymore. Pushing deeper into the forest doesn't prove to be fruitful, not at first. To start with, it's just a lot of trees.

Eventually, when they're both breathing hard and have been running for a long time, they do come across something. It's another cave, but a much smaller one than the first that they saw back at the start. The cave is nestled at the bottom of a sharp, overhanging cliff; it's surrounded by animal tracks and various bushes, nearly obscured entirely.

Frankly, it's the safest thing James has seen so far. Vanity, too, if her small gasp of delight is anything to go by. They exchange a look, faces splitting into relieved smiles, and then they start moving right for it. They're quiet and careful, for which James is grateful when he sees shoe prints on the ground, like someone came barreling carelessly through and ran right into the cave. It's silent inside, and James doesn't know if they're going to get another opportunity like this.

Cautiously, James lets Vanity's hand go and raises both palms at her, silently telling her to stay put. Vanity crouches down, her face strained and lips pressed together tightly. James gives her one last reassuring look—he hopes—then eases inside.

He barely makes it a few careful steps inside before there's a garbled shriek and a fist colliding off-center with his jaw. Weight slams into him so he goes stumbling back from the dark of the cave and right back into the light, landing hard enough that the air is knocked from his lungs.

Instinctively, James lashes out, his hand hitting something that earns him a muffled yelp. He jerks his knee up, slamming his hands against the body holding him down, shoving it away. He scrambles to his feet in just enough time to hear Vanity give something of a war-cry as she proceeds to repeatedly hit the person with a stick. Not a very big stick, mind you, and it breaks literally after three hits. James sort of gawks at her in disbelief as she starts kicking the body on the

ground, looking absolutely terrified, but doing it nonetheless.

The body on the ground is on its front, curled up, and James feels himself jerk in surprise as he realizes that it's...Peter?

"Peter?!" James blurts out, eyes bulging. "Wait! Wait, Vanity, wait! It's just Peter!"

Vanity freezes, breathing hard as she stares at him with wide eyes. On the ground, Peter groans and sort of just—flops over, face scrunched as he pushes himself to sit up.

"James," Peter breathes out, looking relieved. "For fuck's sake, you scared the piss out of me. I thought—I didn't know who you were. I didn't know it was you."

"I—yeah, I got that," James says with a deep exhale. He raises his hands at Vanity in a soothing gesture. "It's okay. It's Peter. He's a friend, I promise."

"Oh. Sorry," Vanity replies sheepishly, dropping the broken piece of her stick from her hand as she takes a step back.

Slowly, Peter pushes to his feet, taking a moment to brace his hands on his knees and just—breathe. His shoulders sag as he stands up. "I am...so glad to see you, James, you have no idea. Um, sorry for punching you. I just—panicked."

"It's alright," James assures him, reaching up to prod at his cheek. He cracks a weak grin. "Not so bad, Pete. Besides, I got you back, and Vanity…"

James raises his eyebrows at her. She crosses her arms, looking only slightly embarrassed, looking like any stubborn teenager in this predicament would. At the look, Peter chuckles, then winces as he cups his side.

"Yeah, she has a mean kick." Peter shakes his head and eases out a careful breath. "To be honest, as soon as I heard someone approaching, I was pretty sure I was about to die. I'm very glad to not be dead. Fucking awful about the river, yeah?"

"Yeah," James agrees quietly.

"Seems to be a fatal flaw in the design," Peter grumbles. "Why have supplies and weapons if we can't even *get* to them?"

James shrugs, just as bewildered by it as him. "No idea. Maybe they didn't want us to be able to reach them immediately? Maybe the river will dry up?"

"Murder river," Vanity mumbles, frowning.

"Do you think?" Peter asks James, not hearing her.

"Only way we'll know is if we go back, and I strongly suggest against that," James says, and Peter instantly starts nodding.

"Yeah, I'll take this cave over the other one any day," Peter announces, gesturing to it. "Not much in there, honestly, and it's dark. *But* there's water run-off from the cliff. Just a small trickle on the walls. If we boil it, it should be safe." He glances between them hopefully. "Anyone thirsty?"

"Parched," James says with a small smile. Trust Peter to immediately offer them refuge. Safety in numbers and all that, and James suspects he doesn't want to be alone.

A cannon sounds, making them all jump as they look around. James' smile falls, and immediately, he thinks *Regulus.* His heart lurches, a creeping dread making his muscles tense. James needs to get to him, to make sure he's—

"Let's not stand out in the open," Peter mumbles warily, reaching out distractedly to usher Vanity towards the cave with the same mindless instinct to keep her safe that James has. James takes a deep breath and follows.

~•~

"You want me to *what?"*

Evan looks exasperated. He plants his hands on his hips and raises his eyebrows at Regulus, canting his head to the side a little bit. "You heard me. Come off it, lover boy. Don't pretend you can't climb; I've seen James, he's taller, and you're not going to tell me you're not climbing *him,* are you?"

Regulus takes it all back. He rues the day he ever showed an interest in being possible allies with Evan Rosier. Regulus scowls at him, but that only makes him smirk.

"First of all, climbing a person is entirely different from climbing a fucking *tree—"*

"How so?"

"Trees won't keep me from falling. *James* has arms."

"Ah, so you *have* climbed—"

"Rosier, if you want to keep your tongue, you might want to shut up."

"Well, you can't cut my tongue out without a dagger," Evan sing-songs, tossing the ridiculous amount of vines he's collected and rolled up from hand-to-hand. "So, if you *want* a dagger, I suggest you start climbing."

Regulus glances warily from Evan to look at the tree, more than a little uneasy. Climbing isn't exactly...Regulus' *thing.* He may have a tiny, small, *infinitesimal* fear of heights—which is very fucking sensible, honestly. People don't have the ability to fly for a *reason;* obviously they're meant to stay on the ground.

The tree that Evan has chosen is the one closest to the back of the cave in the field. It's large and unnervingly tall, and there's a few different branches that stretch out over the crimson river that three have already lost their lives to. Evan's plan to essentially climb the tree, swing over the river, and drop safely down to the other side isn't a bad one, all-in-all. Regulus just hates it with every fibre of his being.

"You first," Regulus mutters, shooting a shrewd look at Evan, who looks vaguely amused.

Evan chuckles and winds the vine around his chest, tucking it in and pulling it tight so it stays in place, leaving his hands free as he approaches the tree. He glances back at Regulus and winks at him. "Sure, if you like, but that means if you fall, I can't catch you on your way down. Don't go backing out on me now, lover boy. I need someone to distract everyone else so I can get away if the river suddenly lets people cross."

"Oh, so that's what I am. A high priority target. A distraction. Your personal lookout," Regulus grumbles, watching Evan stretch up to grab a branch on the tree and brace his foot on a knot that juts out, effortlessly hauling himself up. He starts climbing with ease, like he was born to do it.

"We all have things that makes us useful," Evan calls down without so much as a grunt, or any strain in his voice, the fucking prick. "Like me, I'm being very useful to you now. And you—well, there's no denying that between me and you, there are far more people who are out for your blood than mine. But, you know, if all goes well, it won't be a problem."

"Comforting, thanks," Regulus says dryly, approaching the base of the tree as Evan steadily gets higher.

Evan doesn't respond, so Regulus takes a deep breath and tries to do exactly as Evan did. It's not like the tree has perfect footholds or little ledges for him to cling to. Regulus struggles with the whole ordeal, huffing and puffing and shaking like a leaf that would much rather be safely on the forest floor. Briefly, he imagines Sirius laughing at him for getting himself into this mess, then dashes the thought away. Sirius used to tease him about his little fear of heights, but this is…

Well, this is different. Regulus isn't climbing a tree back home and getting stuck, needing his brother to come up and coax him down with quiet teasing and gentle words. Regulus is climbing a tree with someone who essentially needs him because he'll be the first that other people will try to kill if things just so happen to go wrong. Regulus is climbing a tree to get to a weapon, so he can defend himself against the people who will try to kill him at some point, especially when they inevitably find their own ways across the crimson river. Maybe they're planning to build a fucking boat, who knows?

Yeah, Sirius wouldn't be laughing about this.

Evan, who Regulus is starting to hate a little bit, continues to climb higher—uncomfortably high, at this point. Regulus makes the very stupid mistake of pausing to catch his breath, automatically looking down and immediately feeling his stomach drop out from underneath him when he sees just how far the ground is beneath him.

"Oh, shit," Regulus chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut as he presses his forehead to the bark, his limbs shaking from the effort to hold himself up. If he were to fall now, he would be seriously injured; he'd break *something,* without a doubt, and maybe just fucking die. So, brilliant, that's just *brilliant.* He groans and tips his head up, heart sinking when he sees that Evan is still climbing, utterly calm about it. "Okay. Okay, just. Okay. Keep going, don't look down; keep going, don't look down; keep going, don't look down."

Sirius told him the same thing that day, when Regulus got stuck in the tree. It wasn't even a particularly large tree; Regulus was just a fucking baby about the whole thing. He couldn't help it. He didn't even know he was afraid until he was already up there, too scared to come down, and he remembers thinking—rather dramatically—that he'd just die up in that tree, until Sirius talked him down from it.

Regulus was seven. The mantra Sirius used shouldn't really work now, after all these years, but somehow it does. He keeps going, and he doesn't look down. If Sirius is watching, if this moment is being televised, does he realize what Regulus is doing? Does he even remember?

Eventually, after too long, Evan swings himself up on a thick branch, yet again with annoying grace that Regulus would very much like to smack him for. He scoots back and swings his legs, looking down at Regulus with a snort.

"Need some help?" Evan asks in amusement, leaning down to offer his hand. Regulus would have to climb a little higher to be able to reach it.

This is a pivotal moment, and Regulus knows that. If he takes Evan's hand, it's a sign of trust—a shaky sign, but a sign nonetheless. If he *doesn't,* it shows a complete lack of trust that could be detrimental later on. The problem is, if Regulus takes his hand, Evan could easily just—drop him. On purpose.

Regulus doesn't trust anyone. That's for the best, generally, but in this situation… Well.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus climbs higher until he's within reach, then stops to squint at Evan's hand. His whole body is shaking, and he feels like, at any moment, he's going to give out and fall. He genuinely isn't sure he'll be able to pull himself up onto the branch, not on his own. Still, it's a risk. A very big risk. Evan wiggles his fingers and raises his eyebrows.

Regulus gives him a sharp look of warning that essentially says *if you try anything, I'll take you*

down with me. Evan just looks amused again, so Regulus huffs out a harsh breath and flings his hand up, his heart racing. Evan surges down to grab it, clamping down tight and helping haul him up with a grunt. Regulus scrambles against the bark and throws his leg over the branch, his breath punching out of him once he's seated.

Stupidly, Regulus peeks down at the ground and nearly vomits, his head spinning as a weak noise slips out of his mouth. It's a weakness he would be ashamed of if he didn't feel like he was about to faint. Oh, that's high. They're so high up. Fuck.

"Ah," Evan says, strained, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't break all the bones in my hand, thanks."

Mortified, Regulus snatches his hand back from Evan's, choosing instead to place his hands on the branch between his thighs for some sort of stability. Evan flexes his hand with a slight grimace, then snorts quietly and shakes his head.

"How are you so comfortable up here?" Regulus grits out.

"I've been climbing trees my whole life," Evan says simply, still swinging his legs like he's having fun. Oh, he's mental.

"Why?" Regulus asks in disbelief.

Even shrugs lazily. "No one ever thinks to look up."

Regulus doesn't really have anything to say to that. He sort of gets what Evan means, even if climbing trees was never his method for hiding. He had his own methods—he's a Trojan Horse—but he knows that's what Evan is saying, basically. No one thinks to look up; if Evan's up, no one sees him. Yeah, Regulus gets that.

"Come on, we need to get as far out on the branch as we can, so we can swing across," Evan tells him, then proceeds to brace his hands on the trunk and just haul himself up, as agile as a cat, balancing on his toes as he goes to stand.

"Evan. *Evan,"* Regulus blurts out in distress, snapping his hands out frantically to grasp Evan by the front of his coat and tug him right back down. The branch shakes with the motion, which makes a whimper fall out of Regulus' mouth, but Evan just drops back down with ease, legs

spreading and swinging yet again. "No. Just—no. Absolutely not."

"Regulus," Evan says, stifling a laugh.

"No," Regulus hisses.

"Well, how exactly do you expect us to get farther out?"

"Not by *walking,* you fucking lunatic. Can't we just—scoot?"

"Scoot," Evan echoes, mouth twitching into a grin.

Regulus glares at him. "I will push you out of this tree."

"You'd lose your balance and fall just trying. You're so shaky, poor lamb," Evan coos at him, utterly unperturbed by the threat. He shakes his head. "Alright, lover boy, we'll scoot. It'll be slower, but...sure."

"It's not as if we're in a rush," Regulus grumbles, watching with a frown as Evan starts scooting back along the branch, using his hands to briefly lift himself up and re-seat himself a few inches away. He glances behind himself as he does it, and the branch shakes a little each time.

"No, maybe not, but the sun is already starting to go down. I'd like to make it over there sometime before it's dark. This will be harder to do without some light, at least."

"You're making exceptional progress. Should you be going so fast? What if—I mean, can't the branch break?"

Evan rolls his eyes. "The branch is solid. It's almost as thick as the tree itself. I promise it's fine. Well, all branches eventually break, and it'll get thinner the farther we go, so we'll have to be careful. Just—come on."

"If this is how I die, I'm going to be *furious,"* Regulus mutters in complaint, but he dutifully

starts...scooting. He does it with a lot less finesse than Evan, but he does do it.

"There's four already dead," Evan comments. "Three to the river. What do you think happened to the fourth?"

"No idea," Regulus says quietly, releasing a deep breath. He's trying not to think about it, because he doesn't want to think about the possibility that it's James.

"Worried about your boyfriend, lover boy?"

"You're lucky I can't reach you right now."

Evan laughs.

They're quiet as they get farther out, focusing on making their way across the branch. Admittedly, Regulus is a little grateful that Evan is indulging him. He surely didn't expect that he would have to metaphorically hold Regulus' hand through this whole process, and he could be a lot crueler than he has been. Honestly, he hasn't been cruel at all.

Eventually, they get far enough out to see the crimson river and cave. They both stop when they see the death eaters still at the front. It's just them now, and some of them are sitting, while others are walking as they gesture to the river. Clearly, they're trying to find their way across. It's not so easy to go hunting for people without weapons to kill them. Not impossible, sure, but they obviously have their objective.

Everyone else—well, Regulus assumes they all ran when the fighting broke out. Chances are, the death eaters managed to kill at least one, while the others made their escape. There's no body, but bodies are collected to be sent home—if there are bodies left to collect. Regulus reminds himself that James got away. He *saw* James get away, so he's probably fine.

Evan and Regulus exchange a look after both staring at the death eaters in the distance. Neither of them say anything, unwilling to draw attention to themselves. Like Evan said, no one thinks to look up, so they're as stealthy as they're going to get at the moment. Remaining undetected is the goal.

In silence—and a lot more carefully now—they continue to scoot along the branch. It does get noticeably thinner, shaking more and dipping a little under their combined weight. Evan glances

down to measure how far the river is. It's wide, and even with them positioned right over it, they still need to go farther out. He grimaces and looks up, making a face that quite clearly states how unhappy about this he is, but he still waves his hand to indicate that they have to keep scooting.

Regulus *really* doesn't want to keep scooting, but he's already here, so he has to see it through at this point. The branch dips further, swaying with a harsh creak, and they both freeze. Evan takes a deep breath and cranes his head down, then glances back at the rest of the branch behind him.

"We can't go further," Evan whispers. "The branch will break."

"Can we make it across?" Regulus whispers back.

Evan chews on his lip for a moment, then squints down at the crimson river below them. "We'll have to swing wide, which means we'll have to go lower down on the vine. It's—it'll be risky, and we'll need to be quick, or our friends over there will notice. And—um, it'll probably be uncomfortably close."

"None of that was good information, Evan," Regulus hisses.

"Well, I'm not sure what you want me to do, Regulus," Evan hisses back, waving his hands around jerkily. "Our options are fairly limited. We're already here, so we may as well. Either we die, or we don't."

"I vote we *don't."*

"Yes, me too, so just—listen to me, would you?"

Regulus clenches his jaw. *"Fine."*

"The vine will hold you, and you'll need momentum to get across," Evan explains, his voice low as he starts unwinding the vine around his chest. It's actually a few different vines that he twined together, winding them around each other to make them more structurally sound—or so he said. It makes sense, so Regulus believes him. "You'll want to get as far down as you can, almost until you're about six feet above the water. There should be about this much vine left below you."

Evan demonstrates by holding the vine out from one hand to the other, his arms outstretched to his full wingspan, which isn't very much vine compared to all that's left over.

"Hate that," Regulus admits.

"Yeah, I'm not a fan either," Evan agrees with a frown. He sighs and stoops down to start tying off the vine in between them. "Swinging is simple. You hold on and rock your body. You'll need to let your legs hang so you can use them for direction, or else you'll just swing all over. Do *not* let go of the vine until you've cleared the other side of the river and you're sure you'll propel yourself over. You'll want some air."

"Don't like *that* either," Regulus mumbles.

Evan grins at him. "Today's the day you fly, lover boy."

"You first."

"Sorry, it has to be you first, I'm afraid."

Regulus rears back. "I think the fuck *not.* Evan—"

"It can't be me," Evan says with a heavy sigh. "Whoever goes last has to keep a hold of the vine when they make it over, and I don't think you have as much experience as I do to be able to manage it. It's better for you to let go, or else you might swing back into the river. I've spent days—and years before the training room—doing things like this. You haven't."

"I'm not doing that," Regulus informs him bluntly. He doesn't care if that makes him stubborn. "I don't—I'm just not. I won't know how to do it if I don't see you do it first."

Evan runs his tongue over his teeth, eyes narrowed, and then he leans forward, lowering his voice. "Regulus, we *need* this vine to make it back over, do you understand? You need to trust yourself, and you need to trust *me.* I'm already trusting you by *letting* you go over first, because you could easily get a weapon and kill me the moment I touch down. Now, trust doesn't come easily to me—and obviously not you—but we need some level of trust between us to do this."

Regulus stares at him for a long moment, hands gripping the branch tighter. Evan holds his gaze steadily, without wavering, and Regulus tries to ignore the truth in Evan's words. It does make sense, unfortunately, because he understands what Evan is saying. A part of Regulus wants to refuse anyway; a part of him wants to just abandon this entire plan, all because he doesn't know how to work well with others.

That's the thing, though. Sirius told him that, at some point, he would eventually find himself in situations where he'll have to rely on other people to survive. The arena is a lot like life in that way, just more condensed, and a lot more brutal about it. Regulus—if he's going to survive—needs to learn to play well with others. He just didn't expect it to happen so soon, and really, these are less than ideal circumstances. It's so easy to die here. One mistake, and that's it.

You only do what you're willing to do. In there, you have to be willing to do more than you ever have, or you'll die, Sirius had told him. Fuck, Regulus hates when he's right.

Exhaling slowly, Regulus nods. "Talk me through it."

Evan does. He tells Regulus exactly what he has to do, not skipping over any detail, murmuring to him as he ties off the vine and secures it. And then, all there's left to do is—do it.

So, despite every instinct screaming at him not to, Regulus does it. He scoots forward to reach down and grab onto the vine, keeping a firm grip as he hooks one leg around it, then tries to convince himself to swing the other one over. He needs a second, because his body protests it, rejecting *any* possibility of falling. Then, there's a hand hooking under his knee, and Evan gently helps him down, keeping him from swaying so much. He leans down as far as he can go, then lets Regulus' leg go, leaving Regulus to hold himself up in open air.

Regulus does *not* like this. His entire body clings to the vine, and his arms are still sore from climbing the tree. Evan nods down at him, murmuring to him, encouraging him to work his way down. Not too fast, and no sliding, or his palms might sting enough to make him instinctively let go.

Yeah, that's not possible. Regulus isn't sure there's a force in this world powerful enough to make him let go of this vine right now. It's actually a struggle to lower himself down, because his body would much prefer to cling to the vine and never move. His limbs tremble, but he goes down anyway.

Hanging into open air over a river that will kill him if he falls into it—well, he's not having a good time, to say the least. As he gets lower, Regulus can see where the vine stops, only just a few feet

above the water, which isn't comforting *at all.*

When Regulus reaches where he thinks he's meant to go, he just hangs there for a moment, breathing hard. His legs are still wrapped around the vine, and it's a battle to convince them to let go, using only his arms to hold himself up. They're starting to go numb, even as they ache and burn. It's very, *very* unpleasant, and he still has to fucking swing.

Well, he's here now. He can't just *stay* here, and the ground is within reach; all has to do is get to it. So, with a grunt, he starts rocking his body. It takes him a bit to build up momentum, and he keeps his legs together like Evan told him to, which does keep him mostly going in one direction. The branch creaks and groans above him, but he forces himself to ignore it. He can only worry about so much at one time.

Regulus does build momentum, though, with effort. He can hear himself panting, and his hands are sweaty, which is very fucking terrifying since they're the one thing keeping him from plunging to his death right now, but—no, he's fine. He's actually—he has this. He can tell that he does, because he's starting to see across the crimson river, the ground on the other side like a beacon of hope.

He swings back over and over, sailing forward, then does it once more when he's sure that he's arcing up over the other side. On the next pass, Regulus feels his stomach swoop, and he huffs out a soft, startled breath as he lets go right at the peak—just like Evan told him to. He does, in fact, get air.

For a moment, Regulus is flying.

Well, it feels more like floating, honestly, and then gravity reminds him who's in charge by promptly tugging him towards the ground. Regulus somehow manages to not scream as he falls, but he can't stop himself from groaning as he hits the ground. Evan had advised the loose tuck and roll method, but Regulus doesn't quite manage it. He rolls, alright, but he does it with absolutely no grace whatsoever.

When Regulus stops, he just splays out on the ground, chest heaving as he stares listlessly up at Evan. He's so far up, and he's leaning down to reel the vine up to stop it from swinging too much. The movement might draw the attention they don't want. Regulus' whole body is sore, but he is, mercifully, on the ground. Safely. Not dead. Or hurt. Well, not *too* hurt, anyway.

"Fuck," Regulus whispers, closing his eyes, and then he releases a quiet, muffled, possibly hysterical laugh.

Regulus doesn't move, just staying where he is, recovering as the rush of adrenaline dulls. He does watch as Evan makes his way down (much faster and with more grace than Regulus, the bastard), doing basically the same exact thing that Regulus did.

As Evan is swinging, Regulus pushes himself up with a grimace, his body not at all pleased with him, *especially* his arms. Still, he eases to his feet, though he stays crouched. They're around the bend of the cave, so the death eaters are out of sight for now, but it's better not to be too loud or move too much. So far, no one knows they're here, and Regulus would very much like to keep it that way.

Regulus could, theoretically, rush to the cave to get a weapon to kill Evan with, but he won't. Evan has to trust that he won't, just as Regulus had to trust him on making it over here. He stays where he is, watching with a scowl as Evan swings himself over, letting his grip on the vine go slack, but keeping it in his hand with his arm stretched out as he sails down. He hits the ground *dangerously* close to the river, but he stumbles back with the vine still in his grip.

Evan gets his balance, pushing up on his knees with a grunt, then rolling to his feet. He pulls out the stick he'd shoved into his boot and stomps it into the ground, making sure it's secure before tying the vine to it so it won't swing away.

Regulus doesn't even want to think about the fact that they're going to have to swing back across the river soon enough. That's a problem for future Regulus. Present Regulus is about five seconds from getting his hands on a dagger, preferably more than one, so that's what he focuses on.

"See?" Evan whispers as he comes slinking over, a grin on his face. He claps Regulus on the shoulder. "Trust."

"I'm never trusting you again. That was awful," Regulus hisses, glaring at him.

Evan chuckles. "Sure, lover boy, whatever you say."

"Come on," Regulus mutters, turning to face the cave.

Getting into the cave won't exactly be easy. The cave itself has one entrance, and the back of it arcs down like a hill, closed off where it meets the ground. Their only option is to go inside from the front, which is where the death eaters are. Yes, they're separated by the river, but if they can sneak

in without alerting them, that would be great.

It's getting closer to evening now, so they're not in broad daylight doing this, thankfully. Regulus can't help but notice the drop in temperature as the sun fades faster and faster.

In silence, Regulus and Evan share a look before moving over to crouch down beside the cave, moving slowly along the side. The outside of the cave is cold to the touch, like ice. It sends a shiver down Regulus' spine, and he makes sure not to touch it. He's in the front, so he holds out his hand to halt Evan behind him as they reach the side of the entrance.

Regulus peeks around carefully, peering at where the death eaters are. There's seven of them, so none of them have died yet, or were one of the ones to go into the river. Muliciber sits with Avery tucked up under his arm. Quinn, Hodge, and Axus are also sitting, and they're facing Mulciber and Avery. Willa is fully just lying down, looking to be lazily playing with her hair in her face. Bernice is the only one up, and she's moving along the side of the river like she's waiting for some sort of miracle to get her across.

If Regulus had to guess, they've circled the entire river that wraps around the cave, so they know there's no bridge or clear path to get to the other side. Regulus can't hear them, but he's sure that they're all trying to think up some way to get to the weapons. Bernice is thankfully walking along the river in the opposite direction from Regulus and Evan, but Regulus can't be sure that she won't turn around.

If they're going to go, they need to go *now*.

Frantically, Regulus waves his hand at Evan, then stays low to the ground as he whips around the mouth of the cave, hugging the wall even though it feels like ice. He pushes in as fast as he dares, going further where it's dark and ducking behind the rack of swords for cover. Evan joins him in seconds.

They stay still and silent, holding their breath, but there's no change in the distant sound of voices. No shouts. No threats. Nothing. Regulus exhales quietly and looks over at Evan, who is grinning right at him in pure relief. Helplessly, Regulus feels his mouth tug up at the corners.

Unbelievably, they've done it.

There's still much more to do, but they've made it, and that small victory makes it all worth it.

Inside the cave, there's no supplies. It's all weapons, which means that anything else useful will be outside attached to the poles placed sporadically around the cave. All things they could really need; flashlights, emergency blankets, matches or fire-starting kits, canisters to collect water, and no doubt some sort of nutrition. Having weapons is good, yes, but there's more to the arena than just fighting for your life. There's also fighting to *survive.*

Regulus is already thirsty, and after everything that he's done to get here, he's tired and hungry, too. It's getting colder by the minute. They're going to have to risk getting supplies, which is going to be hard, since the bags are mostly out in the open.

But first—weapons.

Behind them is a table with various weapons on it, and yes, there are daggers. Three of them, to be exact, and there's a thigh holster for each leg that will hold at least two. Regulus goes right for them, instantly feeling better as soon as he has one in his hand. He straps the two holsters onto his thighs, sliding the daggers in place, but keeps the third in hand.

When Regulus looks up, Evan is holding up the hook with the rope attached to it, lips pursed. That's for Axus, no doubt, and keeping it out of their hands is a good idea, because they're fucking deadly with it. Regulus inclines his head towards it in silent encouragement. Evan likes rope, right?

Shrugging, Evan hooks the hook on his shoulder and winds the rope under his armpit, holding it in place as he finds a tactical knife, multipurpose enough for all uses, including stabbing people. He claims that for himself, too.

Regulus slips his hand up and reaches out for the hatchet on the table, holding it carefully as he bites his lip. He really shouldn't. It's not as if they can just take every weapon, seeing as they only have two hands between them, and they don't have a bag and their pockets aren't big enough to hold them. Still, Regulus can't stop himself from stuffing the handle in the front of his coat, letting the sharp edge hang over the zipper.

When Regulus glances up, Evan mouths *lover boy.* Regulus swats him on the arm, which makes Evan grin at him.

"We need supplies," Regulus breathes out.

"The farthest pole had two bags," Evan mumbles, not daring to raise his voice. He's shaking a little, likely from the cold. "It's far enough away from our friends that, if we're very careful and very sneaky, we should be able to get them and get away without anyone even knowing we were here."

Well, they've made it this far.

With a nod shared between them, they start making their way back out of the cave, now with weapons that they have, world of wonders, *not* turned on each other. Hm. Trust, indeed.

They stay pressed up against the wall of the cave, which makes Regulus start shaking, but he ignores it because his teeth aren't chattering yet. Peering out of the cave shows that the death eaters haven't moved. By some stroke of luck, Bernice has joined the others, and they're all huddled close together. Regulus *thinks* one of them is trying to start a fire.

Again, if they're getting those supplies, they need to do it now, while the death eaters are distracted. Evan leans around to point out the pole he was talking about, and it is farthest from the others, nearly around the side of the cave. It's mostly out of view, and it's not even that far from the vine they tied off.

Regulus nods, and then they go.

They stay low, but they move quickly and quietly. Regulus almost doesn't dare to breathe, and despite how cold it's getting, he's sort of thankful that it's getting darker. Makes it less obvious what they're doing, for one thing.

In the distance, Mulciber lets out a shout that has both Regulus and Evan hitting the ground and lying flat. It turns out to be loud cheering, because it seems someone has indeed gotten a fire started. Cautiously, Evan and Regulus pick themselves back up and keep going.

Regulus' heart is thundering by the time they make it to the pole, and neither of them waste time as they snatch the bags off their hooks. They grab one each without any fuss and immediately continue on, heading right for the vine.

As they move, Regulus stuffs the hatchet in the bag, then copies Evan in looping his arms through the straps so it rests between his shoulders. He really should put his dagger in it in preparation for going across the river, the way Evan has, but Regulus wants to keep a hold of it. He'll just put the

handle between his teeth when he swings over.

"Alright, this needs to be quick," Evan whispers as he unravels the vine. "We're not climbing back up, just swinging over and making right for the forest. We have to get a running head start and jump up, keep our legs up, and jump to the other side. I'd like to go back to the tree and pull the vine up so they don't see it and think to use it, but priority is getting across. Watch me, alright? I'll swing the vine back over to you and wait on the other side, so be ready."

"Why do you get to go first?" Regulus mutters.

Evan looks exasperated. "For fuck's sake, Regulus, just *trust me,* would you? We need to get this done as quickly as possible and this isn't just climbing down. You need to see it. Now, pay attention and *be ready."*

Regulus huffs, but he ultimately gives in, mostly because things are moving fast and Evan isn't giving him much of a choice, but maybe a little bit because of trust, too.

Staying low, Regulus remains off to the side, watching how Evan winds the vine between both arms and reaches as high as he can go as he backs up. With a running start, he heads right for the river, only to kick off the ground at the last second and curl his legs up as he sails across.

It's fine, at first. Regulus can see that he's going to make it. And then, with no warning whatsoever, there's a very loud *crack,* and the branch gives way as Evan arcs up over the side. He curses, his body flailing through the air, and he lets go almost desperately as the branch comes falling down. Evan only *just* makes it to the other side as the branch hits the water with a deafening splash. Pale hands break through the surface to drag the broken branch under, taking the vine with it.

"What the fuck was that?!"

"Did you hear that?!"

"Who's there? Oi, I think someone's over there!"

Evan scrambles to his feet on the opposite side of the river, looking utterly stricken as he meets Regulus' eyes.

Regulus, who's trapped on the other side.

The death eaters can be heard rushing closer, and still, Evan doesn't move. He just stands there, visibly horrified by what's just happened, and he chokes out, "Regulus, I—I didn't—"

I should have gone first, Regulus thinks, even though he *knows* that, if he did, he would have died. He wouldn't have had the skills that Evan just used to make it across. And there Evan is, frozen in place, his eyes wide and locked with Regulus'. He still isn't moving, even with the others getting closer.

"Evan, you need to go," Regulus hisses. "Go *now."*

"But—"

"Go!"

Evan stumbles back, breathing hard, and there are loud calls of, "It's Rosier! Get him! Get—"

That's all Evan apparently needs to hear before he's whipping around and tearing across the field towards the forest as fast as he can go. Two of the death eaters—Willa and Axus—go after him, but Mulciber and the others don't. No, instead, they come to a halt across from Regulus as soon as they see him.

"Well, would you look at that?" Mulciber says with a loud, malicious laugh. "Now, Black, how did you get over there?"

Regulus' eyes slip shut.

Well, fuck.

Chapter End Notes

let me go ahead and get this out of the way now: yes, we will see sirius (and remus) while the games are taking place, i promise. just not every chapter. we get them in the next chapter, though <3

right, so, we have a title reference!!! the crimson river. fun fact, i actually had this arena pictured before i ever started writing this story. i did tell you that this fic would be different from the original story in a lot of ways, and that includes what takes place in the arena. there are some similarities, but overall, it is VERY different, and i have written it in a way that a lot of you won't be able to guess what happens next. i do love hearing your theories, though, so let me know your thoughts!!!

ahhh, we got evan!!! and then we immediately lost him again at the end 😭😭😭 evan, babe, come back, you were so funny. lmaoooo him having to work with regulus "i have trust issues" black is so funny to me. he really just got stuck with one of the most suspicious, grumpy bastards in the arena, and now he's on the run. regulus and evan were SO CLOSE. they would have gotten away with it, too, if it weren't for the gamemakers breaking the branch. tsk.

then there's james, vanity, and peter. vanity really is the only one with a braincell between the three of them lmaooo. she's just like: hey, first priority is water, remember? and james is like: oh, right, thanks. i totally forgot that life-saving information. LEAVE HIM ALONE HE'S BEEN THROUGH A LOT 😭😭😭 not peter decking james in his face, he really just started swinging first and asking questions second. vanity fully just beating the shit out of him—or trying to—is so funny to me. listen, they're all frazzled and on edge, okay? give them a break.

and then you've got the fact that regulus is now stranded on the other side of the crimson river. how do you think that's going to go for him? at least he's safe, right?

anyways, that's all for now, but...ill see everyone on thursday!!!

IM UPDATING ON THURSDAY

current remaining alive in the arena as of this chapter: 20
those that have died as of this chapter: 4, all unknown

EDIT: a lovely person actually drew a visual representation of the arena, so if that's something you want to see, go here

or the full link: https://darquevdg.tumblr.com/post/690249632016695296/the-arena-fic-crimson-rivers-by-zeppazariel

Ice

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to torture (bluntly stated, but not described in detail)
-references to child abuse (physical and emotional; Walburga and Orion's A+ parenting again)
-references to addiction (drugs and drinking)
-references to the death of children (happens off-screen and not described, you might blink and miss it)
-child endangerment (due to the arena and those inside it)
-references to past violence (not explicitly described)
-references to past murder (explicitly described)
-explicit description of murder in current time (due to the arena)
-explicit descriptions of blood and violence

yes, i will be putting a brief summary in the end notes of who kills and who dies in this chapter for those of you who want/need to be prepared/spoiled, which is perfectly valid!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's starting to get really cold," Peter whispers, hunched over on himself in the middle of the cave, by the small, crackling fire with his arms wrapped around his center as he presses himself forward into his bent legs.

James exhales shakily and sees his breath lightly fog out in front of him. As the evening starts inching towards night, it's growing so cold that it's a legitimate concern. Next to him, Vanity is rattling so hard that her teeth are chattering, and she's practically touching the fire with how close to it she is.

"Y-You know," Vanity says through her shivers, "my m-mentor said th-that f-freezing is the l-leading cause of d-d-death in the ar-re-rena. So, it's n-not looking good f-for us."

"Oh, ye of little faith," James mumbles, his fingers numb to the point they're prickling. "Get over here, Peter."

Like it pains him, Peter shuffles over with a shudder, nodding when James gestures for him to sit down on the other side of Vanity to box her in between their bodies. They all scoot closer to the

fire simultaneously without even talking about it, holding their hands out to leech off the heat. Vanity presses tight to their sides, still shivering violently.

"J-James," Vanity wheezes, "if th-the temper-er-erature drops even m-more, then it's n-not looking g-good f-for *me."*

"Hey, we'll keep you warm, alright?" James says softly, nudging her shoulder with his own. "Me and Pete. And we'll keep the fire going all night, yeah? Promise. Maybe freezing is the leading cause of death, but...not for you, okay? Your mentor was just trying to prepare you, is all."

Vanity gives a tight, jerky nod. "S-She was really kind t-to me and Ho-Hodge. Gave u-us r-really good adv-vi-vice."

"Wait, Hodge?" Peter asks curiously. "He was the other one reaped with you?"

"M-Mhm," Vanity hums.

"Who's your mentor?" Peter murmurs.

"M-Marlene McK-Kin-Kinnon," Vanity stutters out.

James blinks in surprise. Sirius had, of course, been very forthcoming about everything he knew and learned about his fellow mentors, as well as their tributes, but in some cases, there wasn't very much to tell. Some mentors are tight-lipped about these things, especially if they know what's good for them, or so Sirius said, because letting the wrong information slip to the wrong person could be the cause of their tributes dying. Sirius did mention Marlene, though, but he had very little to say other than the fact that she had two young tributes this year, who would—more likely than not—die very quickly.

"Yeah, Marlene McKinnon," James comments gently, watching the small, fond smile flicker on Vanity's face. There's admiration there, and it makes James' heart clench. "Sirius talked about her a bit to us—he's my mentor. Well, he's my best friend, but also my mentor, technically."

"I kn-know," Vanity says, sounding exasperated as she rolls her eyes, despite her shivering. *"E-Ever-ry-ryone* knows."

James huffs a weak laugh, leaning over into her a little harder, grateful when Peter does the same. They're practically squishing her between them at this point, fighting valiantly to make her warmer. "Right. Well, Sirius told us how amazing she was, you know. And they're friends, he said. You know what that means, don't you?"

"W-What?" Vanity asks, looking up at him.

"That means it only makes sense that we're friends, too," James tells her with a gentle curl of his lips.

At this, Vanity cracks a beaming smile, even while her teeth chatter. She turns and presses her grin into Peter's shoulder, stuttering out a laugh, and Peter laughs along with her.

The night carries on, growing colder with each passing minute, to the point that they're all shivering violently and Vanity has nearly stopped—which, James knows, is actually a very bad sign. She's fallen asleep, and that makes him anxious, but he keeps stoking the fire and rubbing one of her hands between both palms while Peter does the same to the other.

At some point, Peter rasps, "James…"

"Yeah?" James asks, looking over at him. Peter has a pained look on his face, and he drops his gaze down to Vanity before carefully glancing up again. James instantly shakes his head, refusing before Peter even says it. "No. *No,* Peter. She's—I know it doesn't look good, but she—she'll—"

"James," Peter says more insistently, looking heartbroken.

"She's making it to morning," James snaps, his voice firm, and he rubs her hand harder. It feels like ice between his palms.

Peter opens and closes his mouth, face twisting, and then he looks away without saying a word. He shakily adds another twig to the fire, eyebrows furrowed in the orange glow that bathes over his features and dance on the cave walls. James looks down at Vanity, his chest cramped with concern.

At that moment, a cannon goes off, making James jolt and go tense all over. The first thing he thinks is, immediately, *Regulus?* Then, following that, he flings a hand up to cup the side of Vanity's neck to try and see if she has a pulse. She's still shivering, just not as much, and her breath hits his arm. It's worryingly slow, but it's there.

"Is she—" Peter can't seem to finish.

"Yeah, she's—she's alive. She's going to live," James says with a deep exhale, dragging his gaze back up to Peter's as he drops his hand to go back to warming Vanity's stiff fingers again.

"Five," Peter breathes out, turning his head to look over at the mouth of the cave. "Who do you think…?"

"I don't know," James croaks, utterly fretful, his stomach cramping as his fear and anxiety spikes. *Not him. Please not him.* He swallows harshly. "I really don't know."

~•~

Regulus stares up at the sky, though his vision is repeatedly obscured by his every exhale, a billow of white smoke that drifts up every time his breath leaves his numb lips. He's shivering all over, so cold that he's aching.

The sky is littered with stars. It feels like being mocked. There are no constellations that he recognizes, as if the sky was designed without them, just nameless stars hanging like props in the sky. Not real. Even still, Regulus stares up at the brightest one and imagines it's Sirius anyway.

The cave—which feels literally like a fucking glacier—isn't exactly the best place to be right now, honestly, but he doesn't have much of a choice. He's lying back on the curve of the top, on the roof, above the midpoint inside the cave.

His bag fortunately came with an emergency blanket, which is probably his only saving grace at the moment. He's wrapped up in it, trapping the minimal heat he's capable of inside with him. It's possibly the one thing standing between him and death right now. There's a variety of death surrounding him at all sides, which isn't just him being dramatic.

"Come on, Black, no point in hiding!"

Case in point: that.

Regulus would scoff if he could, but he's genuinely too cold to manage it. He doesn't even bother to turn his head, already knowing what he'll see. Mulciber, Avery, Bernice, Hodge, and Quinn are exactly where he saw them last, standing on the other side of the river with rocks in hand, a large fire burning to keep them all warm. Willa and Axus haven't returned yet, and the most recent cannon—the fifth dead—rings in his ears. He hopes it wasn't Evan. He refuses to think it was James.

The death eaters, upon discovering him across the crimson river, had immediately begun heckling him. It didn't take them very long to start pelting him with rocks, chasing him around to no end. Going inside the cave didn't work, because Bernice and Avery have freakishly good aim; the only thing that kept him from being stoned to death was scrambling up the cave where they couldn't get the proper angle to hit him.

That doesn't mean they haven't stopped heckling him, though. There were a few breaks in between, of course—pausing long enough to start a fire when the temperature dropped (and continues to drop), for example—but they always resumed. It's been everything from taunting him, to threatening him, to trying to bait him into coming back down. At one point, Mulciber even dared him to throw one of his daggers, try to get a shot in, but Regulus knows better than that. He's not putting a weapon in their hands, not for anything.

It crossed his mind, of course, to just toss all the weapons and supplies into the river so no one could get to them, but he's wary to do it for multiple reasons. He doesn't know how his time in the arena will go, and this is only the first day, so he'll be quite furious with himself if he needs something in the future and can't get it because he already tossed it. Furthermore, the gamemakers surely won't like it, and he's not willing to give them more reasons to target him than he already has. On top of that, throwing everything away into the river would only be possible if the others aren't around to throw rocks at him. He's still considering it, if the death eaters fall asleep, but even still...he thinks he'd have to be in a very bad emotional state and completely desperate before he just tossed away supplies and weapons that could be useful in the future.

Avery—the idiot—had tried to recruit him. Said they'd spare his life if he'd provide them with weapons and supplies. Just throw it over to them. Regulus had told them to fuck off, just like James, but he *definitely* wasn't polite about it.

At first, Regulus had mocked them back. Taunted them. Did everything he could to rile them up and infuriate them, which was probably stupid, but it's not like they could get to him, and honestly? He'd sort of childishly relished in it. But, as more time passed, Regulus fell silent and stopped engaging, and now he's far too cold to speak.

Technically, Regulus has the advantage. He has all the weapons and supplies at his fingertips. That doesn't mean shit, though, when he can't make a retreat, or even access any of the weapons or supplies without rocks being thrown at him. He dodged and outran most, but a few clipped him, so he'll no doubt have various bruises blooming by tomorrow.

Yet, the threat of the death eaters seems so inconsequential compared to that of the elements. Regulus is genuinely worried that he's going to freeze to death by morning. It's so cold out now that he thinks a *lot* of the smaller people are going to freeze to death, frankly. Maybe someone already has. There's a fifth person dead. Who or how remains to be seen.

It doesn't help that Regulus can't start a fire on the cave. He has matches, but nothing to keep the fire going. So, here he is, shaking like a leaf and scowling up at the sky. If he dies like this, he's going to fucking *riot.*

"Hey! Hey, do you see this? The river is frozen over!" Avery abruptly shouts, and Regulus freezes. Well, he freezes as much as he can when he's shivering so violently.

"Do you think—"

"You try it."

"Get fucked. *You* try it."

Regulus scrambles up frantically, rolling up his blanket to shove into his bag as he flips over. He's still very cold and stiff, but the way adrenaline floods his nervous system and how his blood starts to pump really spurs him into action. He crawls further up the cave, staying low, dagger in hand.

He reaches the peak just in time to see Mulciber grab Hodge by the arm and shove him towards the river, snapping, "Well? Go on, then. See if it holds."

Hodge stares hesitantly at the river, his arms wrapping around himself, and Regulus tips his head down to examine it as well. It's still a vivid red, even in the dark, but a thick film of ice is layered over the top, almost making it look pink underneath. Slowly, looking utterly terrified, Hodge shuffles towards the edge of the river. He doesn't move for a long moment, and Bernice steps forward to shove him in the back of the shoulder roughly, spurring him into motion.

Regulus tenses when Hodge reaches the river and slowly, oh so slowly, pokes his foot out to press the very tip of his shoe against the ice. Immediately, pale hands smack up against the bottom, making Hodge yelp and stumble back, but the hands don't break through the surface. They just rest in place for a moment, then retreat again, disappearing into the depths.

"Oh, yeah, that's how we get across," Avery declares, a feral grin spreading across his face. Regulus sees his body tense, his foot pressing into the ground, and then he starts running, carelessly sprinting right onto the ice and ignoring the hands that bang up against the ice beneath him.

Alright, Regulus has seen enough.

Surging around, Regulus launches to his feet and takes off running, nearly tripping down the decline of the cave as it slopes down to solid ground. He manages to keep his balance and uses the stumble to give him further momentum, throwing himself forward with everything he has in him.

"He's running!"

"Weapons, weapons, get the weapons first, for fuck's sake!" Mulciber roars. "Avery! *Avery,* you fucking—"

Regulus doesn't look back or let himself hesitate as he darts onto the iced-over river, hearing the hands that pound beneath his feet, trying to get to him, and not stopping for a second. With his bag on his back and his daggers close, Regulus skids across the ice until he makes it to solid ground on the other side, and then he goes barreling right into the forest.

Someone—Avery, no doubt—doesn't stop to get weapons and, instead, continues to give chase, not letting up or slowing down. Regulus makes it into the forest and goes crashing further inside, barely able to see where he's going, but he hasn't been beside a warm fire for the last few hours. He hasn't had any water (to be fair, neither have the death eaters), and he also hasn't been lazing about all day. Despite being so fast, how cold he is and his exhaustion are serious issues, those that mean Avery manages to catch up to him.

Regulus knows when he's close. He can hear it. He's trying to outrun it, but it's no use. Avery slams into his back and takes him down to the ground, and Regulus lands with a harsh thud. He rolls frantically with the motion, attempting to shove Avery off of him, but Avery just scrambles to get on top of him. He straddles Regulus, slapping at the ground, and then he raises his hand in the dark

and strikes Regulus in the face.

Avery is holding a rock. A big one. A cold stone that slices Regulus' cheek open and clips him on the lip hard enough to make the corner of his mouth bleed. Regulus can taste it on his tongue, the thick weight of salt and iron and rust. It's disgusting, honestly, but he swallows it in favor of breathing, because he can't exactly spit it out at this moment.

Breathing hard, Avery seems to grasp the rock better with both hands, lifting it high up above his head, and Regulus becomes abruptly aware that he's about to get his skull bashed in. The world doesn't slow down with his impending death; if anything, it seems to *speed up,* and Regulus' brain fails to *keep* up. His body has no such issues, though.

It's reflexive. Just—immediate instinct. Regulus throws his legs up to knee Avery harshly between his legs, making him fold forward with a groan, and then he swings his hand up and buries the dagger in Avery's throat all the way to the hilt.

Avery makes a choking noise.

Regulus can see him in perfect detail, even in the dark. He can see the way he's frozen, his arms still raised like he's a puppet on strings he hasn't realized have been snipped yet. His eyes are wide with shock, mouth opening and closing as no sound comes out. And then, Regulus wrenches the blade back out with a deep, heaving breath. Avery's arms fall, the rock hitting the ground with a thud. His eyes are glassy, and they're visibly dimming, going dull. When Regulus tilts and pushes on him, Avery slumps to the side, blood pouring from his throat.

Before Regulus even stands, the cannon sounds, and Avery doesn't move anymore. Avery isn't breathing anymore. Avery has that unnatural stillness that comes from a lack of life, because he's dead. Regulus just killed him.

The world seems to warp in and out as Regulus stares at Avery's body, frozen in place and wide-eyed. It doesn't really come back into focus until he hears pounding feet on the forest floor, heading right for him.

Swallowing thickly, Regulus glances at Avery for one more second, all too aware of the blood that drips from his blade, from the very tips of his fingers—and then, he turns on the spot and keeps running.

He doesn't look back.

~•~

James is the one who stays up even when Peter falls asleep. Vanity is curled up against him, and they've moved so close to the fire that it's probably technically a hazard, but the warmth has seemed to help. She's shivering again, and breathing more deeply, which James takes as a good sign.

Still, to keep the fire going, wood is a necessity, so he drags himself up to brave the cold alone. It's late out now, the moon hanging high in the sky, and James' eyes are itchy with the need to sleep. He won't be able to, though, not until he finds out who's dead and, more importantly, who isn't.

There's six now. Another cannon went off for the sixth a few hours ago, briefly making James panic when he thought Vanity wasn't breathing—but she was. She's strong. She's a fighter, and she'll fight her way to morning, until it's warm again. That doesn't mean James' panic overall has gone away, because it hasn't, and it won't until he's absolutely *sure* that Regulus is alive. James thinks he is. Oddly, he thinks he—well, he just feels like he would know, somehow. Just...fundamentally.

More accurately, James knows he's not going to be fully okay until he sees Regulus again. He needs to. As soon as tomorrow, James is going to go find him, because how the fuck can he get him home if he's not right by his side the entire time? Vanity has Peter now to look after her until James gets back with Regulus firmly in tow. Tomorrow, James will find him.

Outside the cave is awful, harsh, just absolutely fucking brutal. The wind is like shards against his exposed skin, unforgiving. It's so cold that his frame rattles like his skeleton is vibrating in an attempt to shed his flesh like a particularly stiff coat. James ducks his head down and grits his teeth against it, planning to make it quick, only gathering the first few sticks he comes across. They just need enough to make it to morning.

James has a tiny armful and is just about to go back into the shelter of the cave—not the best, but better than nothing, that's for sure—but then there's the sound of trumpets and horns that make him drop all the sticks as he whirls around. He tilts his head up towards the sky, wide-eyed as he watches the banners of the fallen tributes begin.

"Please, please, please," James chants under his breath.

It plays out in the order that they died. First, there's someone James doesn't know—one of the ones that refused to talk to anyone—and, despite this, his heart still aches when their face hovers in the sky. Following that is a child—yet another one that James didn't know, but a child all the same, can't be more than seventeen years old. A lump forms in his throat. The third looks to be older—which doesn't make it much easier, honestly—but James remembers when she fell into the river, mere moments before Vanity nearly did the same.

The fourth—James recognizes the fourth. His breath punches out of him, a harsh clench clamping down on his chest as he stares up at Dylan's face in the sky. Dylan, only twenty-one, a best friend at home that will never get him back. Dylan, who didn't really have much of a family outside of his best friend, who was so good at starting fires, like he always wanted to keep people around him warm. James swallows harshly and feels his shoulders sag, trying not to let himself think about how it happened, how it might not have happened if James had been there. A mere few days ago, Dylan was smiling at him shyly, and now he'll never smile again.

The fifth isn't anyone he recognizes either. Another child, though. Very, very young. Heartbreakingly young. It's enough to make tears spring to his eyes, because between that and Dylan, he can't stop himself from feeling terribly upset. The tears sting his cheeks as they fall. Maybe they'll freeze there.

The sixth…

James blinks as he stares up at Avery's face, admittedly startled by this one. The death eaters—that doesn't make any sense. James can't work out why *Avery* would be dead. Quinn or Hodge, maybe, because they're the ones the death eaters will dispose of first. Avery wouldn't stray far from the rest of his group, so it would be hard to kill him, at least not without the others rushing to kill whoever tried. Did he fall into the river? Eat the wrong plant? It's just—baffling.

The sky grows dark again, and James bows his head, exhaling shakily as he gently closes his eyes. Irene is alive. Mathias is alive. Evan is alive. Vanity and Peter are alive. Yes, so is Mulciber, Bernice, Axus, Willa, Quinn, and Hodge—but that hardly matters. What matters the most…

Regulus is alive. He's still alive. He's still out there.

James lifts his head and looks up at the sky, entertaining the thought that maybe, just maybe, Regulus is doing the same, just as relieved to know that James is alive, too.

"Just stay alive. I'll find you," James whispers on an exhale, then dips down to scoop the sticks back up and go back into the cave, a new weight lifted off his shoulders.

~•~

Sirius regrettably remembers his first day in his games. It had been designed like a mountain, hills everywhere, the very top where the weapons and supplies were. There were a lot of trees, but they were thin and not the kind one would climb. The only shelter to hide in was the random cabins placed all over, completely gutted and offering no comforts, usually without doors as well. On his first day, he spent it curled up in a tiny room in one of those cabins, cooking the rat he'd managed to catch and barely getting any rest.

Sirius didn't kill anyone on his first day. No, that came later. Well, rather soon, actually—he killed two people on his second day, four on his third, three on his fifth, one on his sixth, none on his seventh or eighth, then the final two on his ninth. Twelve people in less than two weeks. Sirius Black, everybody.

Regulus has killed someone before the night is even over.

Rather against his will, Sirius remembers each of his kills in the arena. Every single one, in excruciating detail, so vivid that he can close his eyes and transport himself right back to those moments even ten years later. Sometimes, that happens to him anyway, especially in his dreams. It happened a lot more often in the first few years after the arena, completely out of his control, usually hallucinations that James had to talk him out of. A few times, Sirius was so out of it that he'd nearly hurt James, because he was back there, or because he wasn't free from his own head. James never blamed him for it, and Sirius will never forgive himself for it. What a pair they are, eh?

Sirius' first kill, though. Gunther Biloby, twenty-three years old, coming right at sixteen year old Sirius Black with a mace on a chain made of steel, swinging it at Sirius' head with wild and frightening precision. Sirius had nothing but the wooden spear he'd carved sloppily for himself the first night with a sharp piece of stone.

Nothing could remove the memory from his brain of taking that spear and shoving it right through Gunther's eye, all the way down until Gunther finally stopped moving. The flimsy spear had broken off into his skull, so Sirius picked up the mace before he walked away from his first kill.

Ten minutes later, he was back in his cabin, staring at the blood on his hands and rocking back and forth as he struggled to remember to breathe. He never did really catch his breath after that, and he doesn't think he's breathed the same since.

Sirius wonders, as he watches his brother on the screen, if he feels as fundamentally altered as Sirius did after his first kill. Not his last, and certainly not his worst, but there's *something* about that very first one. It's—damaging. You can't come back after that. The first one is where it all starts; and yes, the ones that follow aren't easier, or less impactful, but…

Well, the first one has weight. It's a permanent weight, in fact, one you can't shake. That shift from something innocent, to a killer. Because you've killed someone now, and you can't ever change that. It doesn't matter if you weren't really innocent before; murder rips at the soul, and Sirius' is a shredded tapestry, but he remembers the brutality of that first tear.

Regulus has successfully evaded the remaining death eaters by taking refuge in a tree. Not *up* in a tree, but *literally* inside a tree. He'd found one with a hollowed out trunk, a small space he could tuck himself into, and he's curled up into it now. The death eaters ran past him a while ago now, and they're not circling back. They're not going to, as far as Sirius can tell. They're settling down for the night, trying to get some sleep.

Meanwhile, Regulus is scrubbing furiously at his trembling hands, despite the fact that he's cleaned all the blood off already. His dagger, too. There's no more blood, but Regulus continues to frantically try to scrub it all away, like he's still seeing it there. Sirius' heart breaks, because he knows what that feels like. He knows what it is to look at your hands and see them stained with blood, permanently.

The only thing that seemed to bring Regulus comfort was the fact that James' face wasn't splayed on a banner in the sky. He'd watched avidly, stiff and frozen in place, and at the end, all the tension had drained out of his body for a brief moment. Sirius knew he was relieved about James, and possibly Evan, too. Still, he hadn't been able to see Avery's face in the sky. As soon as it appeared, he'd looked away and went right back to trying to clean his already-clean hands.

Eventually, the cold seems to catch up to Regulus, and he curls up inside the tree, wrapped up in his blanket and looking so, so small. There's a camera in there, of course, so it's easy to see the anguish in his eyes that don't drift shut.

Yeah, he's probably not sleeping tonight.

As for James, he's fine with Vanity and Peter. Sirius isn't entirely sure that Vanity will make it through the night, but for her sake—as well as James and Marlene's—he hopes she does. At the moment, Peter has woken up again to take the next shift so James can get some sleep, but James is telling him about the six people who died on the first day.

But, really, that's all. The games aren't televised twenty-four seven. The tributes *do* have to sleep, and there's generally a lot of time where they're just casually surviving—nothing *'interesting'* to the Hallows—so it's not long before it's coming to an end as various tributes settle in for the night.

Sirius grabs the remote and watches the screen go black.

For a long moment, he just sits there in silence, trying to make sense of all that's happened already. James, who is with Peter and Vanity, essentially weaponless and taking care of those who Sirius—uncharitably, but realistically—doesn't suspect will make it very far. James can drag them kicking and screaming, but it's only going to hold him back, too. That's a fucked up way to think, and James won't think that way at all, but this is about facts. About survival. James is carrying around dead weight, and if he does it too long, he *will* sink.

Then there's Regulus, who—to Sirius' surprise and mild despair—has been *busy,* so far. Day one, and he's already done so much that it's hard to organize it all. There's the bond he's seemed to form with Evan Rosier—which, again, Sirius did *not* see that coming, not so soon. Maybe not a secure bond, but a shaky foundation of trust, nonetheless. In the arena, things like that can get you far. Case in point: Regulus.

He has weapons and supplies. He worked *hard* to get them, too. Sirius finds the river around the cave indescribably cruel. He's never seen any arena do something like that before; Horace Slughorn is a sick, creative bastard to think up something like that. It's all so—meticulously designed, the terrain reliant upon the weather. They needed the ice to make it across the river, and the drop in temperature also worked against them. They don't have it easy this year.

Sirius will admit to nearly having eighty heart attacks while watching Regulus get to the weapons and supplies. Knowing he's afraid of heights, but still doing all of that anyway, and also not being entirely sure about Evan's intentions… Yeah, Sirius was holding his breath the whole time, basically.

It was so *close,* too. That's the tragedy of it all. Regulus and Evan nearly made it. Almost, almost, almost—the most devastating word in the world. Fucking *almost.*

Watching Regulus get discovered, then get rocks thrown at him, that was hard. Sirius flinched each time Regulus was hit, or nearly hit. That didn't even compare to the absolute horror and dread that stole over him when the death eaters realized they could get to Regulus. And then Avery…

For one brief, terrifying moment, Sirius had been so sure that Regulus was about to be killed. Avery struck Regulus with a rock, after all. It has left him with a split lip and a thankfully small cut

on his cheek, nothing that won't scab over and heal fairly quickly. But in that split second, when Regulus was just there on the ground, Sirius' heart had nearly fucking given out from the stress. He was relieved instantly, instinctively when Regulus killed Avery with little to no hesitation.

Still, it makes Sirius feel hollow and exhausted to know that Regulus did it, that he *had* to. Sirius was under no illusions that Regulus and James would make it through the arena without killing people. They're targets, so there's just no chance of that, honestly. That doesn't mean it's easy. That doesn't mean it doesn't rip Sirius up inside.

"Sirius?"

Exhaling shakily, Sirius sits the remote aside and glances over at Remus, who is still here. Remus, who stayed. Remus, who held his hand no matter how hard Sirius squeezed it. Remus, who murmured encouragement and endless reassurances in Sirius' ears the entire time. Remus, who never judged him for any sound of distress he made, or for every flinch he gave, or for any tears that he had to blink away. Remus, Remus, Remus.

"I need a drink," Sirius says hoarsely, peeling himself up from his seat to shuffle towards the kitchen.

Remus follows him. He's quiet and watchful as Sirius draws out a glass, grabs a bottle, and pours himself some scotch. Something briny, smoky, a curl of the sea set on fire in his throat. It's heavy, but his tolerance is… Well, it takes a lot for him to get inebriated, which comes from consistently doing a lot in the past. But, sometimes, just the whole ritual of it can have a soothing effect on him —get the glass, pour the drink, drink it, feel the burn in his chest. Routine. Or it used to be.

Sirius heaves a sigh and sits down the glass after his second pull from it, feeling himself squint. He always feels—guilty, when it comes to his self-destructive behaviors of the past. Not all of it was his fault, but he's responsible for some of it, and it's probably one of the bigger reasons he doesn't spiral out of control again. Well, that, and James. Regulus, too, he thought at one point in time, but he doesn't try to fool himself thinking that way anymore. It's not like he did anything with his sobriety. Even when Sirius managed to get sober (with James' help and support) and *stay* sober, he didn't go to his brother to make things right. Regulus barely even knew how bad off Sirius was, honestly. Besides, not being sober wasn't ever the source of his and Regulus' issues. Maybe just a small reason *behind* their true issues, but that was all.

Remus doesn't say anything, but he leans up against the table with his arms crossed over his chest, fingers cupping his own elbows. It's almost like he's holding himself. Sirius has the most ridiculous urge to just duck down and sneak up in between those arms, so they'll hold him, too.

"Well," Sirius says eventually. He holds up his glass in front of his face and narrows his eyes at the liquid inside, studying how it moves in the patterned crystal glass. In the light of the kitchen, the scotch is the same color as Remus' eyes.

"They're alive," Remus murmurs.

"Yeah," Sirius agrees quietly. He takes in a deep, shuddering breath and reminds himself that *they're alive* has to be the most important thing. He can't linger on what it costs, what it takes, for that to be true. Later, when they're in front of him—no, when one of them is in front of him, because it can't be both, fuck—when one of them is in front of him, alive but not well for all the ways in which they had to survive, if they do—if they one of them does, only one, and the odds—

Sirius squeezes his eyes shut and drains his glass, hissing through the burn and sitting the glass down with a thunk. He does the mental equivalent of slapping his own mind to get it in order, forcing it to be still for one *fucking* second. When one of them is home, if they make it home, then Sirius will worry about the repercussions of all that it took to make that happen. The priority *first,* and always, is—they're alive.

He can't think about Regulus, alone and cold inside the trunk of a tree. He can't think about James, hungry and cold inside a cave. He can't think about what they've already suffered, or what they're going to suffer as each day passes until the end. The only thing he can think about is that they're alive, they're still alive, and how he can help make sure they stay that way.

"Sirius," Remus says gently, and fingers wrap around the glass in Sirius' hand, overlapping with his, starting to pull it from his grip.

Sirius snatches his hand away, eyes blinking open as he harshly snaps, *"Don't."*

There's a moment, a brief stillness, where their eyes are locked and nothing—nothing at all—is happening. Something shifts in Remus' gaze, and then something *is* happening, but Sirius doesn't know what it is. In the next second, Remus reaches out to grab Sirius' wrist firmly, not enough to hurt, just enough for Sirius to feel it. He doesn't let go.

"Give me the glass, Sirius," Remus tells him.

"No," Sirius bites out, bitchy about it. "No, I'll keep it, thanks, and just who are you to tell me—"

"I'm your—" Remus falters, only briefly, then huffs. "I'm important to you, am I not? Or am I just a fucking *servant* to you?"

Sirius blinks, admittedly smacked right out of his bad mood for a moment to be very bewildered instead. "Um, what?"

"You heard me," Remus says sharply. "Do I or do I not have a right to be concerned about you? Someone very dear to you, that's what you said. But, what, just a servant who gets no say when it's convenient for you? Is that it?"

"I—what? No? Fucking—of course not, *no,"* Sirius spits out in a mixture of disbelief and...anger, actually. Genuine anger that Remus would think that of him. "I—fucking hell, Remus, is *now* the best time for this? Really?"

"It's the best time when I say it's time. Give me the fucking glass, Sirius," Remus snaps.

"Alright!" Sirius bursts out, mildly incredulous and also baffled and agitated and tense and—

He gives Remus the glass.

Remus sits it aside, then drops Sirius' wrist. "I have *every* right to care about you. You gave me that right, and I'm not letting it go, especially not when you're hurting. You're upset. You're under an unimaginable amount of stress right now. If you want to challenge me, that's fine, but I won't back down."

"It was one fucking drink, Remus," Sirius grumbles, and Remus just arches an eyebrow at him. "It *was.* I'm not a child. I know moderation, alright? I can have one drink, or even a few more, and it doesn't have to mean—"

"But it does mean. Today it will mean. This week—when they're in the arena—it's going to mean," Remus cuts in, and Sirius clenches his jaw, because he's right. "And I'm not—I'm not *blaming* you, Sirius. I'm not judging you. What you're going through right now, I wouldn't *ever* hold it against you how you handle it. But." He swallows, his face softening. "But I won't stand by and do nothing, if I can help. I know there's nothing I can do to fix what's wrong, I know that, but if I can be here for you, and take care of you, then I'm going to. And nothing, not even you, will stop me from trying."

Sirius feels a lump form in his throat, and he just wants it to go away. He's so tired of feeling choked. He's so tired of having things repeatedly shoved down his throat, one horrible thing right after the other, until all he can do *is* choke. He wants to drown it all out, dull the senses, and swallow it all down until it rises back up like bile when he's clear-headed.

Remus reaches out as if he's about to touch Sirius' hand, and Sirius reflexively pulls away from it. Remus' hand retreats immediately, and Sirius chokes on that, too.

"Sorry," Sirius rasps. "I'm sorry, I'm just—"

"You don't have to apologize," Remus murmurs. "Of course you don't, Sirius. If you don't want me to touch you, then you don't. You can pull away. You can tell me no. You can have boundaries, even in respecting mine."

"It just—I just feel so… I feel *raw,"* Sirius confesses, the words wrenching out of him in anguish. "I feel like an exposed nerve, Remus, and it—it's *agony.* Because all of this… It's not fair. It's not—all of it is just wrong."

Remus looks pained. "I know."

"I'm not the first," Sirius whispers, his eyes prickling with building heat, and he's so tired of crying, too. He's fucking *exhausted* with having things to cry about. "That's the thing, isn't it? I'm not the first to have a brother in the arena. Or a best friend. Regulus and James did it first, didn't they? But it's not just them either. It's—it's everyone. Brothers and sisters. Lovers. Mothers and Fathers, some that never got to be. How fucked is that, yeah? It's not *fair.* It's not."

"No, it's not," Remus agrees softly.

Sirius shakes his head. "And we just. We swallow it. We choke on it, year after year after year, because what else can we do? That's all we can do. And *that's* not fair either." He exhales harshly and curls his fingers into the counter. "And I'm no better than anyone else. I am what they made me."

"Sirius," Remus protests.

"No, no, I am," Sirius insists. "Don't you *get* it, Remus? I play my part just like everyone else. This

—I'm a part of it. A *Victor.* A fucking murderer that *they* turned me into, and I—I hate them. I hate them. I want to tear them all apart. I want to make them see what they've created, and I want them to die looking at it. I want *them* to choke on it; I want to choke the life out of them. All of them. Every single sponsor and gamemaker and government official and fucking *Riddle."*

Remus' eyebrows pinch together. "Do you think you're the only one? Do you think that makes you —bad? Because if so, I am as well. In this...you're not alone."

"I—I just—I feel...dangerous, sometimes," Sirius chokes out, his face twisting. "I scare myself, most days."

"You don't scare me," Remus tells him.

Sirius scoffs out a resigned laugh. "Don't lie. Yes, I do."

"I…" Remus pauses, then sighs. "Yeah, alright, you do. Just not in the way you scare yourself. I'm scared of how you make me feel sometimes, but never, *never* because of what I know you're capable of. I've seen you drenched in blood, Sirius. I still find you to be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Did you back then?" Sirius asks. "When I was just a person on the screen, covered in blood, did you find me beautiful then?"

Remus is silent for a long moment, then, "No. I didn't."

"I was ugly, wasn't I?" Sirius whispers.

"Yes," Remus says softly.

Sirius shudders out a deep breath, wondering and always wondering how Remus forever knows what to say. Or maybe he's just perfect, and what he says is the truth. The exact thing that Sirius needs to hear. He wasn't beautiful when he was forged into a weapon, dripping in blood he never wanted to spill. He was ugly, ugly, ugly. Grotesque and misaligned. He would never want to be anything else when doing that.

The Hallows found him beautiful. Thought him beautiful before and after and during his violence. Still find him beautiful to this day, for all the wrong reasons, for all the reasons he hates. He wasn't fucking *beautiful.* He was scared, and dying, and losing parts of himself he'll never get back. It wasn't something to marvel over. It was *disturbing;* it was something people should have never reveled in; it was something everyone should have been horrified by.

"If you were drenched in blood now—their blood—I would find you breathtaking," Remus murmurs.

And that. Well, that's something else. That's...something much different, a very important distinction to make. Being forced into murder, into becoming what he is—that's an ugly process. But Sirius doing it himself? Being what he is out of revenge, or his personal perception of justice… Well, that *is* different.

Sirius is learning that choice and autonomy means something to Remus that it doesn't to most. Considering his position in the Hallow, that makes sense. Individual identity and control over oneself, freedom and equality, that's *important* to him. He can find beauty in that, and Sirius didn't have that in the arena, which is why he can't find beauty there.

"I don't want to be what they made me, Remus," Sirius admits.

"You're not," Remus tells him. "You may think that you are, but that's not true. Maybe it shaped you. No, it *did* shape you, because there's no way around that. We are all altered by the hands that teach us layers to pain, me and you and everyone. There's no escaping that, and *trust me,* I know how infuriating that is, but… That's not *all* that we are. You, Sirius, you're so much more. Don't doubt that. I don't."

"How can you not?"

"Sirius, literally the day we met, you tried to take my mask off to let me *breathe.* If you were what you think they've made you into, you never would have done that. We wouldn't be talking right now if you weren't better than them."

"That's just—that was just the right thing to do," Sirius mumbles. "It's barely anything. If I could do more—"

"More?" Remus laughs, high and sharp. "Don't you dare. That was *everything* to me."

Sirius' mouth snaps shut, swallowing thickly. Remus shakes his head ruefully, and Sirius feels his heart clench. "Oh."

"Never undermine your impact again, not to me," Remus tells him, low and firm, gaze sharp and piercing. "Maybe it didn't mean much to you, but me? It was more than I've had in five years, and you've found ways to give me even more than that *since* you tried to take my mask off. And it's—sometimes, Sirius, it makes me *angry.* Do you even know how frustrating it is that I—I can't give you anything *back?* I—I—"

"You don't owe me anything," Sirius says, the one who's speaking gently now, "and you've already given me so much. What I did—that's just...quite literally the bare minimum, and I don't want you to—to praise me for it, or feel indebted. You *deserve* that, Remus. You deserve to breathe, to speak, to have freedom and control and so much more. You deserve *better."*

Remus looks down at his hands, lips pressed into a thin line. His eyes drift shut. He doesn't say anything.

"It's immoral," Sirius continues quietly. "What the Hallow does to servants. Well, what the Hallow does to...a lot of people. I don't know your crime, Remus, and frankly, I don't give a toss what it was. You can tell me, or you can never tell me, and that doesn't change that what you go through is just as fucked as what I do. It's not a competition, though the Hallow would love it if it was, but I won't pretend like it doesn't matter just because they put you in masks and treat you like you're a machine. I know they torture you, or they have before, and you don't talk about it outside of broad terms, but don't think for a *second* that I'm not aware. I'm not ignoring it. If I could kill them, it'd be for you, too."

Remus' head snaps up as he sucks in a sharp breath. He takes an abrupt step closer to Sirius, then immediately takes a solid step back before Sirius can even react. He blinks. "Sorry. I was about to do something quite stupid, I think. That's—I—you can't *say* things like that, Sirius. It's… It's really…"

"It's the truth," Sirius tells him.

"Yeah, well, give me a bit of warning next time," Remus mutters, blowing out a deep breath and widening his eyes comically as he reaches up to run his hand through his hair.

Sirius' lips twitch. "Sorry that—well, sorry that you felt like you had to stop. I'm not—it isn't—I'm

just—"

"Again, you don't have to apologize for needing—what you need," Remus says, dropping his hand. "You need to not be touched right now. That's okay."

"It doesn't feel—right," Sirius murmurs. "James and Regulus are… Well, it wouldn't feel right if I —"

"Oh, well, that's something else entirely," Remus announces with a frown. "Don't do that. You can't punish the Hallow by punishing yourself."

Sirius feels those words like a punch. Oh, that's—that hits *hard.* Because that's it, isn't it? That's what he does, because he's been shaped so much by the Hallow and all that it's done to him that he feels like an extension of it. He wants to hurt it, so he hurts himself, because he's already hurt, so why not? Because it's so much easier to hurt himself than anyone else.

"Letting yourself be comforted isn't wrong, Sirius."

"James and Regulus—"

"—don't need, or want, you to suffer in solidarity with them," Remus cuts in, holding his gaze. "Do you think that would make them feel better? They wouldn't want that. They would be comforted to know that *you're* comforted."

"It's—I—" Sirius swallows harshly, struggling to explain his guilt with the mere thought. They're suffering, and so shall he. James would be devastated, if he knew. Regulus…

"The last night, after dinner, Regulus helped me clean up," Remus informs him, and Sirius' head whips around to focus on him, fully invested immediately. Remus' lips curl up. "We talked a bit. He's really quite interesting to talk to, you know. Very blunt. I like that about him."

Sirius softens helplessly. "Yeah, he's brutal sometimes."

"It was—intriguing to see the differences between you, and also how similar those differences are,"

Remus muses. "He's blunt, like I said, but also very—guarded. He gets his point across by just saying it, usually with sarcasm. You, on the other hand, are simply transparent."

"I—" Sirius blinks. "What?"

"Sirius, you're as subtle as a brick to the face," Remus declares in fond amusement. "You're guarded, too, though. Just not the same way as him. He shuts down. You...lash out. But, when it comes to getting your point across, you're just very honest and earnest and *obvious.* I can see right through you. Maybe that's just because I take the time to look, I'm not sure, but I don't think those things are mutually exclusive."

"Do you...like what you see?" Sirius asks carefully.

Remus raises his eyebrows at him. "I can't tear my eyes away from you the moment you're within my line of sight. What do *you* think?"

"So, you do?"

"Yes, Sirius, obviously I do."

"Oh. Good. That's—yeah, good," Sirius says, clearing his throat. Remus looks exasperated. "I like what I see, too. When I look at you, I mean."

"I *know,"* Remus tells him with a stifled laugh. "As I said, you're not very subtle." His face softens when Sirius instantly starts blushing. "Don't worry about it, yeah? And don't—don't try to change it. Don't try to change who you are, who you *really* are. I like you for you."

Sirius bites his lip. "Okay, now I *really* want you to touch me."

"And your guilt?"

"To hell with it. My incessant desire for you has it in a chokehold currently. I'll deal with it later."

"Oh?" Remus chuckles, then shakes his head. "Well, I'm terribly sorry to delay your *desire,* but I have a point to make that will—hopefully—help with the guilt."

"And how do *you* make your points, Remus?" Sirius asks, just on the verge of teasing. Remus arches an eyebrow. "Shall I tell you, since you told me how I do? You're not the only one who's observant, you know."

"Go on, then. Give it a go."

"You make your point like you'll never get another chance. Like it's life or death. Like you only get one shot, and you *refuse* to miss. You make your point like you're arguing for it before it's even a debate, and you *know* you're right."

Remus stares at him, then purses his lips. "Well, I *am* right, so—" Sirius snorts, and Remus rolls his eyes. "Right, and how exactly did you come to that conclusion?"

"Remus," Sirius says slowly, "you're the first servant who has removed their mask on their own, *ever.* You're the first to give their name immediately when asked. You're the first to sit down and have a meal with us. You're the first to just keep taking your mask off on your own, because ah, well, who cares who does it if you'll be killed for it anyway, yeah? Those were your actual words you used, by the way."

"Was I wrong?"

"You also poured a drink on someone, despite knowing you'd be punished for it. You called me *sir* just to fuck with me. You wanted me to touch you, so you literally just rolled on top of me and demanded I touch you. For fuck's sake, you got me to keep my clothes off the floor by being *passive aggressive."*

"Well, it worked, didn't it?"

"And now—literally just now—when I eluded to wanting to murder people, you essentially just told me to calm down because so do a lot of people, including you. Oh, and when I said I wanted to murder *for you,* you looked like you wanted to eat me, and then you weren't even ashamed of responding like that. Actually, you scolded *me,* like I should have known that would rile you up instead of frighten you. I mean, Remus, I say this with deep, *deep* admiration, but you're fucking mental."

"Mm, well, sanity hardly gets results," Remus says, lips twitching when Sirius gazes at him with helpless affection.

"I like you *so much,"* Sirius whispers fervently, feeling every inch of how true that is. He likes Remus so fucking much that he feels like he needs to just—punch something.

"Yes, I know." Remus' smile grows, only more lovely when there's more to see. "I do have a point to make, still."

"I know. I'm dreading it. It's going to make me awfully emotional, I can already tell," Sirius murmurs with a sigh.

"Possibly," Remus admits. "Circling back—and nice try with the deflecting—I was telling you that I had a conversation with Regulus after dinner last night. He's fairly...succinct, honestly, but I think we understood each other quite well. He said something, you know, about how you were going to have a hard time while he and James were in the arena."

Sirius swallows harshly. "Did he?"

"He did," Remus confirms. "He told me that I would make it easier, because I'm important to you."

"Suppose he knows me better than I thought he did," Sirius says, and his voice cracks.

Remus' expression is so, so soft. "He asked something of me. He said he couldn't make me, he could only ask, and so he asked. Sirius, he asked that I would take care of you."

A broken, yet muffled sound escapes Sirius' throat. He traps it behind his teeth as much as he's able to, ducking his head forward as he squeezes his eyes shut. His heart stretches in his chest like it's waking up with a yawn and a shudder. It hurts a little bit, and feels so indescribably nice, because Sirius—oh, he didn't even realize how desperately he wanted proof that his brother still cared about him until he got it. Because he didn't know, until this moment.

Regulus, who hasn't asked for anything since he was fifteen years old, not from anyone—as far as

Sirius knows. What he was asking for then wasn't from Sirius himself, but from James. Sirius remembers it, one of the few things that he *can* remember in that awful, awful time right after the arena.

"Please," Regulus had said, his voice strained. *"Please just let me see him, James. Why can't I see him?"*

James had sounded equally strained when he replied, *"I'm sorry, Reg. He's just—he isn't feeling well, is all. Really, he's sleeping a lot right now. When he feels better,* he'll *come see* you, *alright?"*

Regulus made a low, frustrated noise that was dangerously close to tears. *"James—"*

"If you need to talk—"

"Fuck off, you're the last *person I want to talk to."*

"Give me an hour, and I'll come by," James had said anyway.

"Don't waste your time," Regulus had snarled in response, and then there was the sound of his footsteps stomping away.

Sirius, at that point in time, was curled up in bed and dealing with a brief moment of lucidity. He hadn't moved out of bed other than to relieve himself in a week. James tried. Bless him, he really tried to coax Sirius out of bed, tried to coax him to eat more, tried to coax him into a shower or coming down to see Effie and Monty, at least, if not Regulus or old friends, because he wasn't quite ready yet. It didn't really work. Sirius couldn't stand to be around anyone who wasn't James, and sometimes even that was very fucking difficult.

This was before the drinks and drugs; he wouldn't discover them for a few more weeks yet. No, this was during the haze where the only time he felt alive was when he woke up enough to wish that he was dead. When it was all nightmares and hallucinations. Ghosts in the corner of his eye. Gunther used to sit in the chair by the closet with a broken spear poking out of his skull until Sirius asked why James never seemed upset about the dead man in the room. James, upon learning what he meant, removed the chair from the room altogether.

But, on that day, Sirius had come out of his daze at the genuine distress in Regulus' voice. Even

then, even so smothered by his depression, he felt a spark at the thought that his brother needed him. That spark went out as quickly as it formed, though, and when James swiveled away from the door to see him staring, Sirius turned over to stare at the wall instead.

Regulus never made that request again. Regulus never made *any* request again, after that, especially not from Sirius. He hasn't asked for anything involving Sirius since, and yet, he asked Remus for this. To take care of him.

"Why would he do that?" Sirius chokes out.

"Because you're his brother. He wants you to be okay, and he wants you to be taken care of when you're not—just as you want the same for him," Remus replies simply.

"I didn't—he wasn't okay, and I didn't take care of him," Sirius confesses, like he's confessing his greatest sin. "I—I—"

"After the arena?" Remus asks. "When you were likely dealing with insurmountable trauma and reintroduction into society unrelated to the environment that you had no choice but to adapt to whilst *in* the arena? Having to adapt in reverse isn't easy just because it was something you knew before. In some ways, I imagine it must have been harder."

"It was," Sirius croaks. "Remus, it was so hard. It's *still* hard."

Remus holds his gaze. "I know he's your younger brother, but it isn't your job to take care of him. It's no one's job to take care of anyone, unless they're a parent or quite literally getting paid to do it. Where were your parents, Sirius?"

"Oh, them," Sirius says hoarsely, then gives a gruff laugh. "Yeah, let's just say they were useless and move on."

"Did they mean well?"

"No, they did not. They—well, before Regulus and I were ever in the arena, we knew what it was to be targets. Our parents… Like I said, useless, but if you go past that, then I think the proper term is abusive. It's—that stopped when we got older. By older, I mean *bigger.* Like, when we looked like men, they stopped beating us, because it's easier to beat children who can't fight back. I, um—I

put my mother through a wall, so… Yeah. That's—that's when it stopped for us."

"You put your mother through a wall?" Remus murmurs.

"She—" Sirius closes his eyes, grimacing at the memory. "I had gone over to—to see Reggie. It was after I moved out. Regulus and I weren't exactly...speaking at the time, but I…"

"You went to him anyway," Remus fills in.

Sirius clears his throat. "I tried to. I went up to his room, and he was asleep, but I saw the bruise on his cheek. My lovely father, no doubt. Mother never left bruises; she was mostly verbally abusive or slaps and scratches. And—well, I...don't know. I can't really remember all of it. I do remember yelling at them, and them yelling back. Regulus woke up and came down to see what all the fuss was about, tried to get me to leave, told me I was making a mess where I shouldn't…"

"Family drama," Remus mutters.

"You have no idea," Sirius tells him. "She—I *vividly* remember her telling me that I couldn't tell them how to treat their son, and I told her that they weren't allowed to hurt him, or me, ever again. It'd been nearly two years since I got out of the arena, but I was going right back there every night in my dreams, so I don't think it was an empty threat when I told her I'd kill them if they tried. My mother, because she is who she is, grabbed Regulus by the arm, too rough, and then…"

"And then you put your mother through a wall," Remus says.

"And then I put my mother through a wall," Sirius agrees with a weary sigh, tossing up a hand. "It was—I mean, it was just plaster, you know, the sort you can easily put your fist through. She was fine. I think I just—frightened them. Which is. Well."

"Well," Remus muses, "I mean...it worked?"

"I—" Sirius blinks at him, then snorts. "Um, yeah, it did. That's—you find out I put my mother through a wall, and you're just...very calm about this information?"

"It's hardly the—" Remus stops, then seems to think twice, then clears his throat. "Don't forget the important details, Sirius. You put your *abusive* mother through a wall in the defense of your brother. It's not entirely unjustified."

"I feel like you're just excusing literally everything I do."

"I'm not excusing it."

"You're justifying it," Sirius points out.

Remus squints at him. "Well, if it's fucking *justfied—"*

"Yes, yes, but who's to say it is?"

"I say."

"Aren't you biased?"

"Shamelessly."

Sirius laughs. "Oh, you like *me* so much."

"Shamelessly," Remus repeats, gaze warm. It's enough to light Sirius up from the inside out. "Right, well, this has given me new insight to you and Regulus, admittedly. It's—I feel it bears repeating, especially now, but it's not your job to take care of your brother, or anyone."

"I can tell you want me to agree with this," Sirius informs him solemnly, "but I just—don't. I won't. It is my job."

"It's *not,"* Remus argues, because of course he does, because he has a point to make. "You were not brought into this world to take care of your brother, or anyone else, and no one was brought into this world to take care of you. *No one* is required to take care of anyone else, Sirius. It is a choice to do that, or else there's no meaning in it. None."

"Remus—"

"No, listen to me. The people *I* take care of here in the Hallow? Was I born to do this? No. It's an obligation. I am *forced.* I don't do it because I want to; I do it because I will die if I don't. James—I've seen him take care of you. Do you think he does that because he feels he *has* to? Do you take care of *him* because you feel you have to? Lily and I—we took care of one another by *choice,* not out of a sense of responsibility. When you put your mother through a wall, you didn't do that because you felt it was your duty as Regulus' brother. You did it because he was hurt, and it angered you, and because you refused to let either of you be hurt by them ever again. *That* all has meaning. That's important."

"What you're saying about the meaning in it, that's all true, you're right," Sirius admits. "It is important that people care about each other on purpose, not because they're predestined to. I just—it just feels like… Well, that's the thing, isn't it? I always made that choice to look after him, to take care of him, and then I...couldn't anymore. And that wasn't a choice, Remus. I—I genuinely couldn't."

"You blame yourself for it, even while you're very aware that it's not your fault," Remus murmurs, his eyebrows furrowed. Sirius just shrugs, because yeah, pretty much. "I may be mental, but you're a mess, Sirius Black."

"Never denied that," Sirius says with a huff of laughter.

Remus quirks a tiny smile. "You've been taking care of your brother—and James—a lot recently."

"Is it by choice, though?"

"You could...not."

"No," Sirius declares simply.

"Well, there you go," Remus tells him, eyes soft. "You made your choice, and no matter the circumstances, that means something. Regulus? He made his choice, too. He made the choice to ask that I would take care of you, because it means something to him that you're taken care of, even when it can't be him to do it. And Sirius?"

Swallowing, Sirius whispers, "Yeah?"

"You're going to let me do this for him," Remus murmurs, holding his gaze. "You're going to let me do this for him, for James, for *you,* and for me. And you're not going to feel guilty about it, because that takes what it means from all of us."

"Okay," Sirius breathes out, feeling like some sort of weight has just fallen off of him. Not very much. More like cutting the dead-ends off of his hair when they start getting tangled so much, then relishing in how easy it is to run a brush through the strands afterwards.

"Do you still want me to touch you?" Remus asks.

"Really very much, yes," Sirius blurts out, then tries so hard not to feel selfish for it. James wouldn't be upset; that ray of sunshine would be utterly delighted. Regulus—well, he cares about Sirius and wants him taken care of, as it turns out, so it's not as if he would be offended.

Remus does touch him, then. Just reaches out to slide his hand up Sirius' arm, then tugs him close until he can wrap him up and hold him. Sirius sags into him with a deep exhale, closing his eyes as he returns the embrace.

Sirius is like wet clay in Remus' hands, completely at his mercy and guidance. Something in him settles as soon as Remus is holding him like this, like the most peaceful place in the world to be is the circle of his arms. If there's really a paradise out there after you die, Sirius wouldn't know he was dead if he died in Remus' arms, because nothing would change. He's found his paradise right here.

Remus' lips graze his forehead, then press harder the moment Sirius sways into it, his heart *thu-da-thumping* away at the realization that it's a kiss. Remus is kissing his forehead. And then Remus is kissing his temple. And then Remus is kissing the corner of his right eye, one hand slipping to the back of his neck to guide him into tilting his face up. Sirius does, and then he's rewarded for his compliance by Remus kissing his cheek.

He doesn't go any further than that, though, for which Sirius is grateful. Not tonight. Not now. Maybe not ever, because Sirius can't handle that right now, with his brother and best friend in the arena, with them suffering and him *knowing it.* He just can't do it, and he's so thankful that Remus seems to just *know* that, and respect it. He pushes for Sirius to let himself be comforted, and that's all, nothing else. For right now, Sirius can handle that, but only just.

"I must say," Sirius whispers, "I feel very taken care of right now."

Remus laughs that lovely laugh of his and folds forward to bury his face into Sirius shoulder and hair. Sirius presses a smile against his cheek and lets himself be held.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you checking the end notes: regulus ends up killing avery in this chapter by stabbing him in the side of his neck with his dagger.

for those of you who finished the chapter, how are we feeling?

so the river ices over at night. not very helpful for regulus, who was just trying not to freeze to death. poor babe. 😭😭😭

speaking of the threat of freezing to death, poor vanity, am i right? james and peter trying to keep her warm has me like ☹☹☹ also the fact that marlene is her mentor, AND hodge's. talk about a juxtaposition. that will get touched on more later. we do see marlene (and dorcas) again very soon, actually!

back to regulus. he's having a rough time, isn't he? talk about starting with a bang. day one and he's already killed someone in self-defense. me, as the writer: please just let this man REST 😟

and then sirius and remus. oh, my loves. they're just so... i mean, the way they just talk to each other and open up and slowly, over time, grow closer and trust each other more and more???? im obsessed with them. if anyone is upset because they thought sirius and remus were going to kiss, just be patient. it's the first day of the games, sirius was in no condition to be dealing with all of that on top of everything else.

also, i feel like that topic of, you know, caring about people not out of a sense of obligation but due to choice is just...so important. it's so important that people care about other people because they WANT to, rather than because they feel they're required to. people do that every day. can you believe that? humans look at other humans and want to take care of them when they need it, and that's so fucking special to me. like, the world can be awful, yes, but there's always things such as that to be grateful for. <3

also, not sirius being like: i would kill for you. and then remus has to physically restrain himself from dropping to his knees right then and there. they're both SO unwell, but i love them sirius is a mess, and remus is mental. well-suited, i would say.

anyway, im finishing up because im running a little late today! updates on the numbers and stuff:

remaining number of tributes as of this chapter: 18

those that have died: four unnamed tributes, dylan, and avery.

ILL BE UPDATING ON SATURDAY!!!

Stubborn

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone! hope you're all enjoying your weekend!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past injuries (mostly implied)
-references to catching/trapping/killing wildlife for food (nothing explicitly described)
-death of a snake—like a literal one, not a slytherin lmaooo (brief and not explicitly described in detail)
-explicit description of a spider-like creature (for those of you who, like me, are terrified of spiders)
-references to possible future death (due to the arena)
-explicitly stated death (though not explicitly shown)
-mentions of blood

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once, years ago, Lily told Remus these exact words: *Remus, you can't keep doing things you know won't end well and expect them to end any other way.* At the time, she was quite upset with him and also in the middle of treating the wounds on his back, and he was just a tad bit delirious from the pain, but the words had weight to them. Weight that he let roll off his (injured) back.

That would come back to haunt them both in the end, because Remus did, in fact, keep doing things he knew wouldn't end well as if the results would be different, and they never were. Well, until they were. Different results didn't mean *better,* though, which he learned the hard way—blood under his nails and Lily's desperate gasps for air ringing in his ears. You'd think, after all of that, he wouldn't make the same mistake.

Remus knows that this, with Sirius, isn't going to end well, not really. At the very least, they're both going to get very hurt, and that's genuinely the bare minimum of what they can expect. There's also a very real risk of being tortured, or killed, or both, or worse. It's actually foolish of them to be doing what they're doing, what they've been doing from the start, and nothing can really come from it. It's not proper, and Remus shouldn't.

As established, Remus isn't good at being proper, or doing what he should. He never has been.

Sirius looks rough when he comes into the kitchen, like he didn't get much sleep. Remus hates that he couldn't stay with him last night. Eventually, he did have to return to his cell, which left Sirius alone with...literally so much stress that Remus can hardly fathom it himself. It's visibly weighing

on him, leaving him with exhaustion in the lines of his face and a slumped slope to his shoulders.

Even still, Sirius comes to a screeching halt, a spark entering his eyes when he sees Remus, and he breathes out, "Oh. Hi."

"Hi," Remus replies, lips twitching. "Are you hungry?"

"Not at all," Sirius admits.

Remus hums. "Too bad. You hardly ate yesterday, or the day before that, and I've already made breakfast. Sit."

Sirius sits, blinking at Remus as he moves over to sit a plate down in front of him. Again, he says, "Hi."

"Hi," Remus repeats, smiling again before turning away to go get his plate, joining Sirius at the table right across from him. Sirius doesn't move, just staring at him, and Remus raises his eyebrows as he points his fork at him. "Eat."

"Right. Thanks," Sirius mumbles, picking his fork up. He dutifully takes a bite, and they eat in silence for a while. Remus is just glad he is eating, so he doesn't plan to interrupt. Sirius does, eventually. "You, um. You didn't wake me up."

"I do recall being told I *wasn't* an alarm clock," Remus says lightly, and Sirius smiles weakly. "I thought I'd let you sleep in without disturbing you, and you needed breakfast."

"We could have made breakfast together," Sirius points out, almost petulant about it. He heaves a sigh and puts his fork down when Remus stares at him. "I just—I mean, obviously you don't have to do anything, and you're *not* an alarm clock, but I won't lie and say I didn't like waking up to you. I don't want—" He halts, then swallows. "I'm going to be busy a lot over the next few days, and I won't be *here* very much, so I'd like—well, if you want the same thing, and you're okay with it, I'd like to spend as much time with you as I can."

Remus takes that in for a long moment, then nods. "I get that. I was just hoping you were getting some sleep, honestly."

"Not really," Sirius murmurs. "Not good sleep, in any case."

"What's your plans for the day?" Remus asks.

Sirius grimaces. "I have to meet with other various mentors, sponsors, and gamemakers for the daily watch party. It's where I'll be trying to make Regulus and James' time in the arena less difficult. I won't be able to—well, I have to act like I'm...just alright with everything, so it's going to be fucking awful. I'll be out all day, most likely, then make it back here in the evening."

"Will they still be airing the games when you make it back?"

"Yes. I'll continue to watch it here."

"Right." Remus purses his lips. "Well, I'll be here cleaning, and cooking so you have something to eat when you make it back, then we'll watch together, yeah? And you won't have to pretend to be alright with me."

"You don't have to—"

"I know, but I want to. It's all a part of taking care of you, remember? And, as for the chores, I don't have much else to do while I'm here."

"Are you going to watch the games, too?" Sirius asks. "While I'm gone, I mean?"

Remus nods. "I thought I would, yeah. It's—I'm not supposed to, and I usually don't care to, but it's...James and Regulus."

"Yeah," Sirius agrees softly, looking down at his plate with a tiny frown. Remus nudges his foot forward to knock it into Sirius', then gestures to the food with his fork when Sirius glances up. Sirius starts eating again, and they're quiet for another long while.

They don't speak for the rest of the meal, and Sirius only manages to eat half before he gives up.

Remus stands, grabbing his plate and leaning forward to scoop up Sirius'. He moves away to combine the food on both plates onto one, keeping it stored so he can eat it for lunch, then starts getting ready to clean up. It doesn't surprise him when Sirius follows behind with the glasses and proceeds to help.

With a rising surge of affection, Remus watches as Sirius rolls up each sleeve of his shirt and dunks his hands in the soapy water, needing no instructions on how to do this particular chore and seeming oddly pleased with this fact. Remus thinks he would still be utterly enamored with Sirius even if he didn't, and that's how he *knows* he's a goner. He'd never accept a man who didn't know how to do dishes otherwise.

"Thank you," Sirius says abruptly.

Remus blinks. "You're welcome. Wait, for what?"

"For taking care of me," Sirius murmurs as he washes a plate and passes it to Remus. He's not looking at him, and there's a far-away look in his eyes. "You don't have to, and yet you are, and that—means something. That has meaning, like you said. I'd say I'd like to return the favor, but I'd never wish for you to be in a position where you need to be taken care *of*. But I hope you know that I would. And I hope that has meaning, too."

Remus sits the plate down in the sink, shuts off the water, then flicks his fingers. Without a word, he turns and pulls Sirius into his arms. The glass Sirius was holding lands back into the water with a *glub* and a dull thunk as it settles against the bottom of the sink. In the next second, Sirius' hands come out of the water with a splash, dripping suds as he presses closer eagerly and slides his soapy fingers right into Remus' hair.

Sirius melts into the embrace in a way that, quite frankly, makes Remus feel like a god. It's supremely satisfying to have Sirius sink into him as if there's no other place he'd rather be, and that's nothing compared to how devastatingly wonderful it is to be holding Sirius at all.

"You do," Remus says when he pulls away, completely breathless. "You already do take care of me, Sirius, more than you could ever know."

Sirius hums, eyes still shut as he leans into Remus, looking soft and satisfied like Remus touching him has gotten him a little high. A smile curves his mouth, a tempting slope that Remus wants to press his mouth to—but he doesn't. He refrains, somehow, and settles for pressing a quick, fleeting kiss to Sirius' temple, far too tender to be anything other than a big, flashing sign for how he feels about Sirius.

"Oh, *hello.* Hi. Greetings. Good fucking morning, everybody," Sirius announces when Remus pulls away, and he's grinning now, then he's tossing his head back and cackling like he's just told the *best* joke. He sounds exhilarated.

"Stop it," Remus says, amused. He gives Sirius a little push. "Go get changed."

"The dishes—"

"I can do the dishes, Sirius, it's fine."

"I'll help you, *then* go change," Sirius says anyway, then bites his lip as he gazes at Remus in amusement. "I got suds in your hair, Remus. Let me just—"

Somehow, Sirius' hands in his hair lead to them laughing quietly together, playful and happy, and it takes them a while to actually finish the dishes.

~•~

Regulus jerks awake to the feeling of something cold and strange sliding around his throat. He freezes as he peels his eyes open, and in the dark hollow of the tree, he can only just make out something moving along the length of his arm. He has the sneaking suspicion that he knows what that is.

Because it is what it is, Regulus can't be blamed for how he responds. In the next second, he's flailing as he launches himself outside of the trunk of the tree, hitting the ground and frantically yanking the snake from around his throat before it can complete a full circuit and strangle him. He scrambles up when it hits the ground in front of him, hissing and curling up stiffly, and then it tries to *strike,* and—

Well, the strike never lands. Regulus has already snapped his hand out, sending his dagger flying into the snake, where it proceeds to pin it to the ground. The snake writhes under the blade, and Regulus stumbles back, breathing hard. He turns his head away, face scrunching as he avoids watching it die, feeling his stomach churn. A few minutes pass with Regulus just standing there, breathing, his fingers touching his throat.

A snake. They nearly killed him with a fucking *snake.* Sirius wasn't joking about them punishing him. No doubt a gift from Horace Slughorn himself, in exchange for his haircut. Regulus scowls and proceeds to flip off the sky, then quickly stops when he realizes that the gamemakers could, in fact, set loose a thousand snakes on him at the moment.

Exhaling shakily and still trembling a bit from the leftover adrenaline, Regulus runs his hands through his hair and looks around warily. It's morning, but not too early by the sunshine that pours through the gaps in the trees, and it's no longer cold. It's as if it wasn't freezing last night at all, and instead, it's warm and sunny, almost cheerfully so.

There's a theory that Regulus wants to put to the test, but he'll do that later. For now, the most important thing he needs to focus on is getting water and food.

His supplies have a few options for nourishment, but he doesn't want to eat those until he has no *other* options. With a grimace, he looks at the snake, which is now dead.

Well. It's an option.

~•~

Vanity makes it to morning, much to James' relief. It starts warming up when the sun appears again, and Vanity finally stops shivering and gets some color back to her cheeks. She even gets hot when she sits too close to the fire for too long.

They keep the fire going for a bit, boiling more water to help with their thirst. It's not a short process, considering they're using flat, curved stones that barely hold a swallow for each of them, but it's better than no water at all, and just drinking the water that trickles down the cave walls is a *very* bad idea. Sirius told them not to drink water without boiling it unless they could see the source of where it comes from.

James is admittedly hungry, and Sirius was right to say that he was going to wish he had eaten more, because he really does. He also wishes he'd enjoyed his last meal, but there's nothing to be done about that now. They've talked about setting up traps to catch something to eat, which James isn't really thrilled about, but there's nothing to be done about *that* either. They need to eat, so.

Peter and James both know how to make traps, seeing as they both learned in the survival portion of the training room, but Vanity never left the bug station to learn how. It makes James anxious,

honestly, and so he insists that she let Peter teach her.

"But I don't want to know how to kill little bunnies and cute squirrels," Vanity tells him, horrified.

"Yeah, it's not my favorite party trick either, Vanity, but we could easily die of starvation," James replies apologetically, lips curling up when she wrinkles her nose. "It could be a while before anything is caught, so you two need to get traps set up as soon as possible."

"You're not helping?" Peter asks curiously, without accusation or judgement, like he already knows that James *would* help if he didn't have a reason not to.

James sighs and passes Vanity the rock for the third—and his last—rotation of water. "No, I have to go, but I'll be back."

"James, I don't think leaving is a good idea," Vanity comments with a frown. "We're safe here."

There's nowhere safe here, James thinks, but he doesn't say it. The words are spoken in Sirius' voice, and oh, James misses him like a gut-punch. Clearing his throat, he stands up and smiles tightly. "There's something I have to do. If you two catch something, don't wait for me, alright? Eat it. All of it. Don't save any. I'll try to see what I can find while I'm out."

"Be careful," Vanity whispers.

"I will," James assures her, his smile softening before he turns to leave, stepping out of the cave.

He doesn't make it very far before Peter is following and saying, rather sternly, "James."

"Yeah?" James asks, swiveling to face him.

"You're going after Regulus, aren't you?" Peter mumbles. His arms are crossed, and his lips are tipped down in a frown.

"Yes," James admits, not even bothering to lie. "I know he's alive out there, Pete. I need to find

him."

"You can't actually expect to find him in one day," Peter says, looking incredulous. "James, you could be *killed* out there. You have no weapons, or—or *anything."*

"I know, but—I have to," James insists. "It may take longer than one day, you're right—"

"You'll freeze to death at night if you're alone! You start a fire outside the cave, and that will draw people right to you!"

"Peter—"

"If you leave, you're going to die," Peter snaps. "Is he worth that?"

James just stares at him and says, "Yes."

"For fuck's sake…" Peter drags a weary hand over his face and heaves a sigh. "Look, stop thinking with your cock for a moment, yeah? Just—have you considered how *stupid* it is? Not just for you, but for the rest of us? Me? Vanity?"

"I—excuse me?" James blurts out, startled.

Peter narrows his eyes. "James, you *know* Regulus is a target. The death eaters want him, and they *will* search every inch of this arena to find him. If you bring him back here, you're going to bring them right to our doorstep."

"So, what, I'm supposed to just leave him out there all alone?" James retorts sharply.

"Yes," Peter hisses. "This is the hunger games! It's not a fucking retreat in the forest. I am willing to bet anything that the death eaters are hunting Regulus as we speak, and as long as they're doing that, they're not coming for us. I say—"

"You might want to stop before you say anything more," James cuts in coldly, and Peter snaps his

mouth shut. "I understand that you're scared, and worried, and so am I—but I'm not changing my mind. I'm going to find him."

"So, his life is more important to you than mine, than Vanity's?" Peter challenges.

James swallows and rasps, "I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to," Peter replies harshly.

"I—" James looks away, a deep sigh escaping him. It's not about weighing lives, not to him. He knows, realistically, that only one person can make it home, and since he's already decided that he's going to do everything to make sure that person is Regulus… Well, that makes taking care of others who also want to survive much more difficult. He shakes his head and looks at Peter helplessly. "I need to go."

"You're blinded by your feelings for him," Peter announces with something like resignation, "and that's going to get you killed." *Oh, you have no idea how aware of that I am,* James thinks, because that always was the plan, wasn't it? "I don't like it, because I like you. I want you to be alright, James. I want you to be safe, and—and I don't want to do this alone. Vanity needs us *both."*

"You and Vanity will be safe here until I get back. You're right, I don't know when that will be, or what it will take, but I will eventually come back," James promises.

"You can't do that if you're dead," Peter whispers, his eyes wide. "I *really* don't want you to die. You're my friend, and I—I understand that Regulus is important to you, I really do, but I just... I'm worried, alright?"

"Do you *not* want me to come back, then?" James asks, holding his gaze.

Peter frowns, then shakes his head. "No, James, that's not what I was saying. Just…" He deflates a little, swallowing hard and looking at James as if he's already mourning him. In the end, all he says is, "Just be careful, yeah?"

"Yeah," James mumbles, "you too, Pete."

~•~

Regulus hasn't had anything to drink in over twenty-four hours, which doesn't sound too bad until it's taken into consideration just how active he's been in the last twenty-four hours. The running, the swinging, the freezing—it's all taken a toll already, so quickly, and he isn't really letting himself rest. As sore and exhausted and dehydrated as he is, Regulus wastes no time in trying to find a source of water.

It's turning out to be a difficult task, honestly. He's being very careful today, staying silent and watchful wherever he goes, never lingering in one place for too long. The forest is alive with noise, creaking trees and whistling wind and various wildlife on the run, him among them. He's acutely aware that the death eaters are still out there, looking for him, and there's no doubt that they know he killed Avery, so he's sure they're doing everything they can to find him.

All-in-all, Regulus is having a shit day. His head hurts from the thirst. His face and mouth hurt from the fight with Avery. His whole body hurts from all the effort of climbing, and then being pelted with rocks, and *then* nearly freezing to death through the night. Everything just fucking *hurts,* and Regulus is in a very bad mood because of it.

It doesn't help that every snap of a branch, or every rustle of a bush, could be someone coming to kill him, so he's on edge on top of everything else.

His vigilance does pay off eventually, though, when he follows all signs towards water. He knows he's getting closer when he presses his hand to the ground and lifts up leaves, rubbing them between his fingers as he examines them in silence. They're damp. Somewhere around here, there's water.

He finds it less than an hour later, stepping through a break in the trees to find a small brook. It's very thin and runs down the weak incline of the hill before him, a tiny waterfall that trickles past stone. It's fresh, though, and *clean.* Safe. Regulus can't stop himself from diving for it a little recklessly, cupping his hands together to take a deep gulp, eyes sinking shut.

You should have checked the area, says the voice in his head that sounds very much like Sirius.

"Shut up," Regulus mutters out loud, to no one. Lovely. One day in the arena, and he's already going mad.

After drinking a bit more—not too much and not too fast, or he'll get sick—Regulus takes the time to clean his hands. Properly clean them, getting under his nails and between the wrinkles on his knuckles. Still, if he unfocuses his eyes, he can see flashes of Avery's blood stained on them.

He can't clean his hands forever, so he forces himself to stop and goes into his bag to get the container that will hold water. He fills it, nurses at least half, then refills it. The threat of dehydration held at bay for now, Regulus stands back up, only to go still when he hears a branch snap behind him.

Slowly, Regulus turns around, dagger in hand, then feels a bolt of shock run through him when he sees what's waiting there. It is quite possibly the largest spider Regulus has ever seen in his life, except it's—it's something else, too. The spider only has six legs, instead of eight. Where the face of the spider usually would be, there's a torso protruding out high up, along with two arms, and Avery's face. It's like a...centaur, if instead of the bottom half being a horse, it's a fucking *spider.* Oh, and Avery's face is practically split in half with deadly pinchers that click in blatant threat, his eyes black and gleaming.

"You've *got* to be fucking joking," Regulus hisses under his breath, utterly appalled. He knew the gamemakers were sick, and it's not like he's going to be the first in line to say Avery wasn't a shit person, but to disrespect the dead like this? To make them out to be a caricature of themselves? And also, why the *fuck* can't Regulus catch a break?

Regulus can understand that they're using the visage of Avery to unnerve him, but frankly, a spider the size of a fucking bear would have done the trick. He could do without the extra theatrics, thanks. The...Avery spider...thing sways forward, the legs shuffling in a, frankly, creepy way, and the pinchers click yet again in an ominous pattern.

It's still not lunging, so Regulus tries to think of what the best route is in this situation. Fight? He can throw his daggers, sure, but attacking head on will get his head bitten off, and he knows it. Run? He won't exactly be able to run *quietly* with this thing fucking chasing him, and it's going to draw attention at some point, unless he can get away in time. Climb? Oh, he fucking hates climbing, and can't spiders climb? He is *not* about to put that theory to the test. Who does he look like? *Evan?* No. So, running it is. Brilliant.

With a deep breath, Regulus turns and he *runs.*

~•~

James has located berries. *Safe* berries, which he knows for sure because he learned about them in

the training room. He's still cautious just to be safe, pressing a berry to his lips, waiting a few minutes, then to his tongue, waiting another few minutes, and when nothing tingles or stings or goes numb, he trusts the berries enough to eat one. When, after a few minutes of nothing going wrong, James gathers more to eat.

It's not exactly a full meal, but it's better than nothing, and he's had a whole lot of nothing to be sure about that. He eats a few handfuls until the throbbing in his temples subside, then takes another handful with him to pick over as he carries on.

He's been walking for a long time now, making his way back towards the murder river and cave everyone started at. Maybe the river has dried up by now, and if no one is around, it'd be a good idea to get some supplies and weapons for himself, but also Peter and Vanity. Besides, when you're a target, having ways to defend yourself is *crucial,* and James seriously doubts Regulus would go too far from it without at least one dagger.

James himself is lugging around the sturdiest stick he could find on his travels. He doesn't particularly want to use it, but it's dense and strong enough to do damage if he *has* to.

Boom!

The sound of a cannon going off startles James enough that he drops his berries, his head snapping up as his heart starts to race. Again, his first thought is, immediately, *Regulus?* A moment later there's a shrill, high-pitched shriek in the distance that makes his blood turn to ice.

Before James realizes what he's doing, he's running right towards it at full tilt without a second thought. That scream was one of pure *distress,* nothing short of abject terror ringing through the trees. Something is wrong. Really wrong.

James doesn't know how long he's crashing through the forest before he realizes someone is crashing right back towards him, running in his direction like their life depends on it. He makes out that, no, there's the sound of *two* sets of footsteps, which is confirmed a moment later when he collides with two people so hard that they all go rolling.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!* Run!"

"Wait, wait, Irene—"

There's a groan, and James picks his head up to see Irene scrambling to her feet, frantically patting herself all over her body and looking close to tears. Mathias is working their way to their feet, face scrunched into a grimace as they cup their side. There's a gash under their fingers, looking rough but not fatal, sort of just like they were scraped against a tree.

"Mathias," Irene chokes out, "what the fuck?! What the *fuck* was that? Did you—did you see what I—"

"The giant fucking spider Avery turned into? Yeah!" Mathias bursts out. "Yeah, I saw it, but—but I don't think it was chasing *us,* Irene. Look, it's gone, see?"

Irene releases a whimper and gives a full-body shudder, still swiping at her arms. "Oh, I *hate* spiders. Hate them so much. It was so big. It was so—"

James clears his throat.

"Oh, hi, James," Mathias greets, sounding winded.

"Avery turned into a spider?" James asks, confused. "I thought Avery was dead? Died last night, didn't he?"

"Oh, he's *definitely* dead," Irene spits out in revulsion. "The spider is Hallow-made, James. One of their creepy fucking creations. So, it's—it's like the top half is Avery, and the bottom half is a spider. And it has these pinchers—it's so bad, you have no idea. It just ripped someone's *head* off!"

"Who?" James demands. "Who's head?"

"No idea. Some girl," Irene says.

"Nearly got me next," Mathias mutters wearily, gesturing to their side with a wince.

"But it's after—" Irene stops and looks at James, falling silent as she meets his eyes. The look on her face makes dread settle into his stomach immediately. "James…"

"The spider," James croaks, "who is it after?"

Mathias exhales deeply and shares a look with Irene, and then they hold up a hand like they're trying to keep James calm. "It was really unfortunate timing, honestly. Irene and I were just running back after checking the river—"

"It's still there, by the way," Irene mutters.

"Which doesn't make sense, because he had—" Mathias glances at Irene, eyebrows raised. "You saw it, didn't you?"

"I saw," Irene confirms.

"Saw *what?"* James asks desperately.

Irene clears her throat. "Well, we were running back when, out of nowhere, Regulus comes sprinting right past us like—"

"Regulus? You saw Regulus? Is he—"

"James, shush, I'm *getting* there."

"Well, talk faster!" James bursts out.

"He came rushing past us like something was chasing him," Mathias picks up where Irene left off. "It happened so fast, and then this girl comes sprinting right across from us, just the wrong place at the wrong time, and the—spider literally ripped her head off right in front of us. Irene screamed, Regulus was still just running, and then the spider lunged at me next. I jumped out of the way in time, but scraped myself on a tree pretty badly, and then Irene helped me up, and we ran in the opposite direction. It's—James, it's after *Regulus."*

"Fuck," James says. "Fuck, okay, what direction?"

Mathias gapes at him. "James, you can't be serious! That thing is *huge,* and—and there's no way—I'm sorry, but there's no way Regulus can survive that. He's as good as—"

"I haven't heard a cannon yet," James grinds out. "Which direction, Mathias?"

"Towards the river," Mathias mumbles.

"James, I don't think you'll be able to kill it," Irene says warily.

Blowing out a deep breath, James starts backing up. "Only one way to find out. Hey, if you keep going further into the forest for a few miles, then turn left and keep walking for an hour or two, you'll find a cave. Not the easiest to find, it's fairly secluded, but Peter and Vanity are there. If you find it, make sure to announce yourselves when you're going in. There's water there, and Peter is already setting traps to catch something, and you can burn a fire there without it drawing any attention. Just—it's the safest thing we've found so far, so you can go there if you like. Okay, okay, I have to—"

"James," Mathias hisses, "come *with* us. Don't—"

"I can't," James calls back. "I need to find Regulus."

Irene makes a sound of frustration. "You're going to get yourself *killed!"*

James doesn't bother sticking around longer to explain that that was technically the plan from the beginning anyway.

~•~

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckshitfuck, Regulus thinks as he runs faster than he ever has in his life, possibly. He can hear it behind him, the scuttle of legs clamoring over the forest floor, and it's fucking *horrifying.* It's getting too close, and Regulus is—

Regulus is going to die.

"Fuck!" Regulus bursts out, fully just *pissed off* at this point. He swivels around and throws his dagger with all his might, grunting as he stumbles from the force. It's not an ideal situation to be aiming in, running and zigzagging past trees sporadically to slow the spider down, *but* Regulus has good aim anyway. It hits the Avery part directly in the chest, which flings it back with a low hiss. Do spiders hiss?

Well, this one does. It hisses as it rolls, the pinchers clicking, and Regulus resumes running. He manages to get some distance this time, and he's instantly relieved when he breaks through the trees circling the original field they all started in. He doesn't slow down. Instead, he picks up his pace, sprinting right for the river that is no longer iced over. So, his theory is correct; it thaws in the day, and the bridge of ice forms at night, meaning weapons and supplies are only available then.

Regulus can hear the spider gaining on him again, especially without any trees to navigate around. Gritting his teeth, Regulus runs straight at the river, chanting, "Come on, come on, come on, you fucking—"

His whole body sways frantically and with no finesse as the spider gets close enough to dart out with its pinchers, only *just* missing him by a few inches. The river comes closer, closer, so close he could dive right into it, and then—

Regulus abruptly slams himself down, sliding along the ground in a harsh skid as the spider tries to strike down at him, but the momentum keeps it moving forward right above him. He splays out on the ground as the spider goes skittering past, tumbling into the water with a loud splash. Immediately, hands shoot up out the water to grab onto it and drag it under.

On the ground, Regulus slumps on his back, breathing hard, then he starts laughing. It's either laugh, or cry, and so he laughs. It's a hiccupping sort of laugh, and it tapers off fairly quickly as he tries to calm down. Fuck, that was *insane.*

He can barely wrap his head around what just happened. He can't believe it *worked,* and that was his only shot as it was, so some part of him had fully expected to die. Not being dead is so much better, frankly. There's something heady and horrible and nausea-inducing about nearly dying, particularly by having your head ripped off by a giant spider mutated with the man you previously killed. It's literally a living nightmare, and Regulus keeps waiting to wake up.

He can't wake up, because this is reality. How? Fucking *how?*

Blowing out a deep breath, Regulus pushes himself up onto his elbows and squints at the river. He's uncomfortably close to it, so he starts scooting back, not willing to risk it. Once he's far enough away, he stands up and is immediately grateful for the foresight to move away, because he stumbles a bit. The rush of adrenaline is coming down, leaving him shaky and exhausted, but he can't can't afford to rest right now. He gets his balance and draws out a dagger from his right thigh holster.

Great, now Regulus is down a dagger. He huffs and tosses his free hand up, genuinely just—agitated with this entire experience. Not that he expected it to be a vacation or anything, but *honestly.* It's only the second day, and he's already come close to being dead more often than he hasn't.

He wonders if the gamemakers are annoyed that he used their designs of the arena to his advantage. Well, they can get fucked, if they are. Bastards.

Regulus shoots one final glare at the water, then starts jogging back towards the woods, but on the opposite side this time. He knows better than to stick around. All that running and that scream Irene so helpfully released was surely enough to draw attention, and the last thing Regulus needs is more company.

It's as he's making it to the other side that he hears a shout in the distance, and Regulus doesn't even stop to find out who it is or what it's about. He just puts on a burst of speed with a groan and keeps moving.

Regulus takes a sharp left and sprints for a while, at least until he finds a large gathering of rocks. Very big rocks. Boulders, really. They're all leaning against each other, and Regulus dives behind them, because he needs just one fucking *second.* If something else is chasing him already, he's going to lose his mind. He just—he *has* to catch his breath, or he'll die. But, if someone catches him while he's doing so, he'll die.

Frantically, Regulus hunches down to draw his water from his bag, drinking some of it in between his heaving breaths, doing his absolute best to stay quiet. Just for a second, he rests in place, eyes sinking shut as he leans his head back against the boulder he's crouched behind. His body is so sore, but his heart is slowly, oh so slowly, calming.

A cannon abruptly goes off, making him jolt as his eyes snap open, and there's a harsh *crack* of a stick breaking underfoot. Regulus holds his breath. Waiting. Ears straining. The whole world seems to go quiet, and he flexes his fingers around his dagger, perched on his toes as he slowly turns his head.

There's no water nearby. Regulus knows this, because the leaves are dry. Regulus knows *that,* because he can hear them crunching as someone moves closer, step after step.

Regulus' heart thumps as his jaw clenches, and he slowly and silently eases himself to his feet, eyes narrowing. The person gets closer to the edge of the rocks. Too close. Regulus has come too fucking far and done too fucking much to die in the middle of pausing for a drink of water. He's just—not doing it. He is *not* about to die, and he isn't going to run either.

One more step. If that person takes one more step, that's the last step they'll ever take. Regulus will make sure of it.

~•~

James' back thuds against the rock so hard that he loses his breath, and in less than a second, there's a blade tucked up under his chin, giving his throat a cold kiss.

Regulus looks—feral. That's the first thing that James thinks when looking at him. His eyes are sharp to a chaotic point, his pupils shrinking down to a tiny pinprick, the whites of his eyes showing. Like a hunted animal lashing out—that's what he looks like right now. His hair is a mess, there's dirt and grass in it, and his cheek has a bruise blooming under a small cut on it. The corner of his mouth is swollen, his bottom lip split.

Frankly, Regulus looks like he's been through *Hell.*

He's absolutely gorgeous.

Of course he is. James doesn't think there's a state Regulus could be in that he wouldn't find absolutely, unequivocally lovely, just because it's him. That being acknowledged, James admittedly feels concern more so than appreciation, no matter how beautiful Regulus is, always.

James thinks Regulus was going to kill him. No, he *knows* Regulus was going to kill him, because he was looking into Regulus' eyes, and he *saw* it. Regulus fully intended to kill whoever had found him, no hesitation, and then he realized it was James. He saw James, and he froze like someone pressed his pause button. He's still frozen, not even breathing.

It fills James with a sense of mounting dread to think about what has already pushed Regulus to this point. This desperate, ferocious point of defense and survival where murder comes to mind first. A form of self-defense that's become so normal already, only on the second day, that he's doing it instinctively.

There's a shift. Regulus finally exhales, and his fingers flex around the handle of his dagger, which is still poised right against James' throat. Their eyes are locked, and James can feel a tension in the air around them, something charged, like the whole world is holding its breath to see what Regulus is going to do. James already knows what Regulus is going to do, because he's staring into his eyes, and he can see it.

So, James smiles and presses forward into the blade until it digs in just a little, then whispers, "You're hesitating, love."

"Fuck off," Regulus snaps immediately. "I still *could."*

"Well? Go on, then. *Do it,"* James says, then raises his eyebrows and grins wider, waiting.

Regulus' nostrils flare, his jaw clenching so hard that a muscle in his cheek jumps. He steps closer, eyes narrowing, and the blade presses in further, dangerously close to breaking skin. James holds steady, still just grinning, watching as frustration visibly flashes across Regulus' face.

A beat. Another beat. Then, with a low, furious sound, Regulus snatches his hand back, taking his dagger with him as he whirls away with a sharp curse. He paces away, then paces right back, pointing a finger in James' face.

"I nearly killed you, you fucking idiot!" Regulus scolds, and James doesn't know what makes him angrier—that James nearly died, or that he didn't, because Regulus didn't kill him. He's a complex, complicated man, honestly. "You can't just *go up* to people like that, James. Not out here. Are you mad? Do you want to die? You could have fucking *died!"*

"Right, yeah," James says carelessly, peeling away from the boulder to reach out and capture Regulus' chin in his hand, tilting his face to the side so he can look at the state of his cheek and mouth. Regulus huffs, scowling as he turns his eyes away, but he doesn't try too terribly hard to pull back. James lifts his hand to brush his fingers along the outside of the bruise. "How did this happen?"

"Got into a fight," Regulus mumbles.

"With the spider?"

"You saw it?"

"No," James admits. "I ran into Irene and Mathias on the way to you. They told me. Is it—did you lose it?"

Regulus snorts weakly. "Yeah, something like that."

"Reg?" James raises his eyebrows at him.

"It's in the river," Regulus murmurs. "I tricked it into falling in. It's not a problem anymore."

James hums and slides his hand down to gently brush his thumb over Regulus' split lip. Regulus doesn't flinch, but James *is* being very careful. "So, this?"

"Got into a fight," Regulus repeats, quieter this time. James flicks his gaze up from Regulus' mouth to his eyes, and Regulus looks back without wavering. "With Avery."

"Did you kill him?" James asks softly.

Regulus swallows thickly, but his voice is steady when he says, "Yes."

"He did this to you?" James mutters, tilting Regulus' face again, and Regulus apparently has had enough, because he rips his chin out of James' grasp and steps back.

"Yes, well, you should see the other guy," Regulus says sarcastically as he stomps over to grab his bag. He fakes a gasp, then his voice goes flat. "Oh, wait, you can't. Because he's dead."

"Regulus," James murmurs, his voice as gentle as his hands, because he can see past all his sarcasm and mockery. Looking into his eyes, Regulus is brittle. "I don't doubt it was done in self-defense. You didn't—"

"Shut up, James. You weren't there," Regulus hisses, grabbing up a canister that he screws the lid back on. "How do you know I didn't chase him down and kill him, hm? You *don't."*

"I do," James replies, just as simply.

"No, you don't."

"Really? Coming from someone who couldn't kill me?"

"Avery isn't *you,"* Regulus says sharply, then immediately grimaces as soon as the words fall out of his mouth. He shakes his head and stuffs the canister in his bag, zipping it up and putting it on. "Don't take that like it means something. It *doesn't.* You're not a stranger. He is. Well, he *was."*

"Right, because killing strangers is less difficult than killing someone you know," James replies flatly.

"Well, it's certainly easier," Regulus retorts.

James heaves a sigh. "Look, let's just—we can circle back to morality and murder in a moment, yeah? I have questions. First of all, how did you get daggers? The river—"

"It ices over at night," Regulus cuts in. "You can get across the ice without being grabbed, so that's when supplies and weapons are available. I—are you thirsty?"

"I mean, a bit, but I had water before—" James blinks when Regulus turns his back to him. "Er, what?"

"My bag, James. For fuck's sake, get the water out of my bag," Regulus says, sounding exasperated. When James apparently doesn't move fast enough for him, Regulus looks over his shoulder with a glare that could curl paint. James springs into action, reaching for the bag. "There's

a granola bar and a small bag of dried strips of meat. Pick one of those. Oh, and there's a hatchet at the bottom. Take that, too."

"You got me a hatchet?"

"Shut up."

"Aw, *Regulus—"*

"James, I can still stab you."

Chuckling, James resurfaces from the bag with his loot, politely zipping it up again. "Mhm, sure. So, the river ices over. How did you manage to work that out?"

"Rather against my will, actually," Regulus grumbles as he turns back around. "I got over the river before it iced over. It was—there was this whole thing with Evan and vines and just…" He sighs wearily. "It's a long story. To make it short, Evan made it back across, but I didn't. The death eaters found us, so Willa and Axus went after him, and I was stuck at the cave. When it iced over, they chased me. Avery didn't stop to grab a weapon, so he caught up to me and tried to bash my head in with a rock. Didn't quite work out for him."

"Fucking hell," James mumbles with a wince. Oh, Regulus has been going *through* it, hasn't he? "And—and the spider?"

"Just showed up," Regulus says. He arches an eyebrow when James stares at him. "Yeah, I'm not pleased about my shit luck either. That's not to mention that Mulciber, Bernice, Quinn, and Hodge are all out looking for me right now."

"And Evan?"

"I'm not sure. I'm assuming he got away, or I'm hoping Willa and Axus met up with the other death eaters again. There's been two deaths since last night, one which was a woman we never spoke to. The other… We won't know until tonight."

James shakes his head. "Eight dead already, and it's the second day. Sixteen left, including us. Vanity nearly didn't make it through the night, almost froze to death, so this is…"

"Brutal?" Regulus asks flatly. "Yeah, I noticed. You said—so, you're with Vanity?"

"Vanity and Peter," James says with a nod. "I sent Irene and Mathias to them when I saw them. There's a really nice cave, very secluded and hard to spot, and there's a source of water there. Traps are being put up, so we'll have food, too."

Regulus nods sharply, shouldering his bag. "Good. Go back."

"Sure, come on," James replies, reaching out to grab Regulus by the strap of his bag and forcibly tug him along.

"James," Regulus snaps, smacking his hand off his bag with a scowl. Of course. Of *course* he would be stubborn about this. Why wouldn't he? "I said *you* go back. I didn't say anything about me coming with you."

"Well, you are," James declares, willing to be just as stubborn when the need arises. He makes a swipe for Regulus' bag again, but Regulus dances out of range. James slowly narrows his eyes. "Regulus—"

"Don't take that tone with me, James."

"Oh, that's *rich,* coming from you."

Regulus mocks a pout. "Oh, you poor, poor baby."

"You're coming with me," James informs him, not at all joking. He means it. "If I have to tie you up and carry you all the way there, Regulus Black, you are *coming with me."*

"I'd like to see you fucking try."

"Oh, you would, would you? I never took you for the type to be into bondage, but you know, I can make that w—"

"That was quite literally the last moment you should have used as an excuse to flirt, James. What is *wrong* with you?"

"Listen, I see my opportunity, I take it."

"Oh, *please."* Regulus scoffs and rolls his eyes, then darts backwards when James lunges for him again. He raises his eyebrows, looking smug. "Stop making a fool of yourself. You know I'm faster than you are, and I will simply *run."*

"Then I'll chase you," James announces with a shrug.

"That's stalking, and it's creepy."

"Regulus, stop being stubborn. There is water, shelter, and *safety* that I'm trying to get you to. Why won't you just—"

"There are at least four people—if not six— trying to hunt me down and kill me," Regulus hisses, "and that's not counting that everything seems to go wrong around me. All your little allies, your *friends,* they'll all be as good as dead the moment I come within five feet of them. I will be *fine* on my own, as I have been, and *you* will be fine looking after your little group, of which includes a fifteen year old girl, whose death I *refuse* to have on my conscience. Now, go *back."*

James is pretty sure his heart breaks a bit. He can feel his face softening. "Regulus, you're not going to get anyone killed, alright? I *told you,* it's safe. Let's just—regroup there, yeah? I won't make you stay if you don't want to, but just—at least take a fucking break. You're *exhausted.* Please just come."

"No," Regulus declares, then turns on his heel and leaves. James follows, of course. "James, I said *no."*

"Yeah, I know what you said," James mutters, tapping his hatchet against the side of his leg as he walks.

"If you heard me, why aren't you going away?"

"If you won't come with me, then I'll just come with you."

Regulus comes to a screeching halt. He stares at him, that stubborn glint in his eyes again. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"You know, saying it with more emphasis isn't going to change my answer," James tells him, amused.

"You're not coming with me," Regulus orders, allowing no further argument as he whips around and starts walking again.

James follows yet again, because of *course* he does. He can be stubborn, too, and he just found Regulus. He's not about to leave him now, not for anything. He's staying with him, all the way until the end, no matter what it takes. His goal is still the same; it's not changing for anything.

Regulus ignores him for a few minutes, then predictably gets agitated enough that he swings back around, and then he has his dagger to James' throat again in a clear warning. James doesn't even flinch, and really, it's sort of cute that Regulus actually thinks the threat of death could keep him away.

"I'm not leaving you," James declares honestly, holding his gaze. "You'll have to kill me."

Regulus inhales sharply.

James touches his tongue to his top lip, then feels his lips tug up into a smirk. "So, what's it going to be?"

Chapter End Notes

okay, you should all know that irene freaking out about the spider is literally how i react about spiders, no matter their size. she's so valid for that, actually. i NEVER rewatch chamber of secrets because the spider scenes genuinely freak me out. like, ron is such a good best friend, because if that was me, i would have abandoned harry in that forest. actually, no, i wouldn't have followed the spiders in the first place 😭😭😭 yall are sleeping on ron. he was braver than me at TWELVE. i would have taken one look at aragog and immediately fainted, like no joke.

the avery-spider was inspired by my own fears, admittedly, because a spider the size of a bear would make me leave this world in a swift exit. i see one the size of my fingernail and im ready to set everything on fire, so kudos to regulus, irene, and mathias for continuing on in spite of what they saw. rip to the nameless woman who died, though 😔

circling back, james basically spent this entire chapter reminding all his allies what his priorities are, and they all basically went: the mean guy with daggers??? the one who looks like he's willing to kill everyone??? bro, you're gonna DIE. and james was just like: yes, im aware of this, did i stutter?

circling back even FURTHER, i find it hilarious that remus and sirius were having a cute little morning—as they deserve—and then it just cuts to regulus nearly being strangled by a snake remus and sirius: ❤ regulus: 😷😟 lmaoooo the WHIPLASH

also, that scene where regulus was running to the river and he sent the spider into it—i want you all to know that sirius was freaking the fuck out the entire time. we get a mention of that in the next chapter, but i think you should all know he nearly had a heartattack while he was watching.

also², i think it's funny that regulus is just so annoyed by everything that's going on. like, he's so fussy and irritated. if he could give a review, he would NOT be giving this arena five stars 😭😭😭 he isn't having a good time, HELP. he's so grumpy, but to be honest, i would also be pissed off about everything if it was me. actually, if it was me, id probably be dead by the first day, so maybe not. regulus, losing one of his daggers: 😑

and finally, the jegulus reunion!!! yay, they're back together again. what could possibly go wrong? lmaoooo not regulus three chapters ago being like: i will not hesitate to kill you. regulus now: i nearly killed you, you idiot!!! like, king, where was that energy a couple of days ago??? leave him alone, he is NOT having a good day. meanwhile, james: oh, he was going to kill me... anyway, he's so pretty like, babe, you're SO unwell. GET HELP. regulus put his dagger to james' throat TWICE, and this man is thriving.

anyway, let me shut up rambling. let me know all your thoughts and theories, i love them all so, so much!!! thank you for all the comments and lovely feedback! i will be back to answering comments as soon as i have the time/energy, i promise!!! ill be updating again on tuesday <3

oh, and the number/people update!

tributes remaining in the arena as of this chapter: 16
those who have died in the arena as of this chapter: avery, dylan, and six unnamed/unknown others

UPDATE ON TUESDAY

A Reveal

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!! i i hope everyone enjoyed their weekend!!! im posting this a little early. hope no one minds. actually, i never really know when the best time IS to post lol, so i just usually post when i have the time/energy. anyways, hope everyone is having a lovely day. let's get into it <3

warnings for this chapter:

-references to murder and death (because of the whole arena thing, ya know how it is)
-references/discussions of children dying/being in danger (again, because of the arena)
-references to wildlife being killed for food (arena again, but nothing heavy)
-references to past deaths that have already happened
-a little bit of spice (nothing too explicit, though it seems like it will be, but i promise it's not)
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus remembers the first—but certainly not the last—time he thought James was stupid. He was thirteen and James had just kissed a girl in front of him. It was the first time since he was ten years old that he thought James was anything other than wonderful. With one kiss to someone who wasn't him, Regulus felt very justified in finding him stupid, at the time.

For about a week, Regulus hated James, actually. Glared at him whenever he came near, not that James noticed. Stopped talking to him, not that James cared. He even called James stupid right to his face in a fit of pubescent anger, and all that did was make James laugh. But, for a week, James was the stupidest boy in the world, in Regulus' mind, and he hated his guts with a burning passion that rivaled the sun.

Then, of course, James brought him a flower he found on the ground, because he knew Regulus liked to press flowers in between the pages of his journals, and Regulus melted so quickly that being set on fire couldn't have exposed him faster. James didn't mean anything by it, just a mindless gesture of kindness that he was sometimes prone to, usually without any warning whatsoever, but Regulus tumbled right back into his feelings like the slippery slope it already was.

James has always been that infuriating mixture of wonderful and stupid, for as long as Regulus can remember. When he was very young, ten to thirteen, he was completely blinded by his feelings to see all the stupid parts. At twenty-five, he doesn't have those issues anymore.

"James, for the last time, *shut up,"* Regulus hisses, glaring at him over his shoulder. The idiot is *beat-boxing.* They're in the middle of a death arena, and he's beat-boxing. Regulus should have killed him.

"Sorry," James says sheepishly, tossing his hatchet from one hand to the other. "I'm just...anxious. Do we really have to?"

"Yes."

"But—"

"James, we have to eat," Regulus cuts in firmly.

"Right," James mumbles, "but—"

"Shh," Regulus shushes sharply, reaching back to grab James' arm to yank him down into a crouch. As predicted, the wait has paid off, and there it is—a small deer approaching the edge of the small brook. It could be a doe, or a fawn.

Slowly, Regulus shifts to raise himself up from his perch, lifting his hand as he inhales. Just as he exhales, preparing to launch his dagger forward, a hand catches his wrist and James whispers, "Wait. Reg, wait, *look.* It's—they're a *family."*

Sure enough, a doe comes creeping out of the shrubbery to join what's clearly a fawn, their black button-noses meeting for a moment like something out of a wholesome child film. Regulus swivels his head to stare at James, who is looking at him with big, brown eyes and stupidly long eyelashes.

"James," Regulus warns quietly.

"Regulus, it's a baby. A little baby with its mum." James' eyes grow more beseeching, and he sounds so, so sad.

"We have to *eat."*

"I—I know, but...it's a baby. They just want a little water. Come off it, we have the berries I showed you."

"We need *protein,* and you know that," Regulus says softly.

James makes a small sound. "We have that dried meat, don't we? We can just—we'll eat that, and the little family can carry on, yeah? Please? Regulus, it's a little baby."

"Perfect size for us to share," Regulus mutters, and James looks more stricken by this than he did when Regulus admitted to killing Avery. Regulus rolls his eyes, then heaves a sigh and reaches out to grab a rock, tossing it towards the doe and fawn without hitting them, shaking his head as they run off quickly. Regulus glances at James. "Your spine has the consistency of a marshmallow. Just what the hell are you going to do when you need to defend yourself, James? Or when you're *actually* starving?"

"Well, it's not a current issue, so I don't see the point in *making* it one," James tells him. "We have the dried meat, as well as the berries, and also water. We didn't *need* to kill them."

"The dried meat is also deer, you do realize?"

"Not *those* deer. I saved them from their fate."

"Oh, for fuck's sake." Regulus scoffs and swivels on the spot to sit down on the ground with a huff. James looks pleased with himself, the prick. Regulus cannot *believe* that he's stuck with quite literally the most soft-hearted man in this arena. He tilts his head up to the sky, like he's looking directly at Sirius with an expression that clearly states: *are you seeing this shit?*

If Regulus closes his eyes, he can almost picture Sirius' grin and hear his faint laughter. Regulus can't close his eyes, though. Not here. Not when it's not safe.

Ten minutes later, Regulus is sitting across from James, sharing the dried meat and berries, as well as passing the canister of water back and forth. It's not exactly a glamorous meal, honestly, but it'll do.

"I wonder what Sirius is doing," James mumbles in between bites, his eyebrows furrowed.

Regulus snorts. "Two days, and you already miss him, don't you?"

"Dreadfully," James admits.

"You always get like this," Regulus says, shaking his head. "Every year when he's mentoring in the Hallow, you just roam around the district like you're missing half of yourself."

"Feels that way."

"Oh, spare me."

James clicks his tongue. "Don't be a prick. I genuinely do get sad when he's away."

"Poor baby," Regulus coos at him, lips curling up when James squints at him. "Fucking hell, you're ridiculous. If you love him so much, why isn't *he* the one you had feelings for, hm?"

"Well, for one thing, what we have is special and goes beyond the bounds of romance, reaching unfathomable lengths that no one can understand but us, so jot that down," James says primly, and Regulus tries so hard not to laugh at his snooty, defensive tone. It doesn't work, really, and James' eyes grow softer when he sees him laughing. "For another thing, I had my eye on his little brother."

"Scandalous," Regulus comments.

"An outrage," James agrees, chuckling. "I think—I don't know, maybe if our lives had gone differently, maybe we would have ended up together. You and me, I mean. That's wishful thinking, isn't it?"

Regulus rolls a berry in between his fingers, thoughtful. He knows what James means. If Sirius hadn't volunteered, if the games hadn't existed at all, what would they be now? He thinks he knows, and it's sort of heartwrenching. "No, that's not wishful thinking. I think you're right."

"What? Really?" James bolts up, his eyes wide as he stares at him in blatant shock. "You—I mean, you really think so?"

"Like I told you," Regulus says, "we're a great, big tragedy."

It seems to catch up to James then that this revelation isn't something to celebrate, but rather something to mourn. His delight fades out into disappointment like a wilting flower, and Regulus has never hated this world more than he does in this moment. This stupid, fucked up world that took something from them before they even got to have it.

Regulus can picture it clearly, the life they could have lived. One so sweet that it makes his teeth ache. Two days after his birthday, if his name hadn't been called, James' lingering looks would have turned into lingering smiles into lingering touches. He would have shown up at Regulus' door, ruffling his hair nervously, and Regulus would have known instantly what that meant, what it all meant. He wouldn't have believed it at first, but James wouldn't have left him in suspense for long. James is very impulsive, and it wouldn't have taken him much time at all to make a move.

Of course, Regulus would have felt like all his dreams were coming true, and he would have been wrapped around James' finger with no shame. So in love that he was sick with it. Their first kiss, a secret in the dark that left them both with grins and butterflies in their stomachs. Tentative smiles and small brushes of their hands, just two young boys growing up and falling in love, slowly and safely.

It wouldn't all be easy, because nothing ever is. There would be the hurtle in getting Sirius to be okay with it, especially when he was so young and fiercely territorial of his and James' friendship. He would come around eventually, though, because at the end of the day, he would see that they were happy, and he would have understood. Probably would have taken some time and plenty of arguments, but he'd get there.

Then, of course, Regulus would have had issues with his parents, because they *never* approved of James. They barely tolerated him as Sirius' best friend, but as Regulus' boyfriend? Regulus would have been no better off than Andromeda, completely thrown out for his choice in a partner, but Regulus wouldn't have cared. He would have gone right to James, and Sirius would have come with him, and that would be that.

It would have been a good life. A really, truly good life. Calm. Peaceful. The three of them happy, and safe, and together. Regulus can see it. He can almost reach out and *touch* it. James chasing him around in the rain before swinging him into a kiss. Sirius running past to shove them in a puddle while cackling. Late nights by crackling fires, soft kisses in the low morning light, the steady

comforts of family, and no pain. It would have been a life full of love.

Instead, there's this. There's a name called and a volunteer. There's a freshly fifteen year old boy crying into his pillow every night because he's scared his older brother is going to die. There's a nearly sixteen year old boy coming apart at the seams because he's watching his best friend fight for his life every day, not knowing if he'll win. There's Regulus, so *angry* at the world that he shuts down and hides away from everyone, even the one boy he adores. There's James, so *desperate* to do everything he can that he's too much, too relentless, never quitting, even when there's nothing he can actually do.

That's it. That's where it all unravels, until the close-knit reassurance of the lives they could have had comes loose, and this is all that's left. A great, big fucking tragedy.

~•~

"Do you think we would have gotten married?"

It's been a few hours—James thinks, considering the way the sun is starting to set—and they haven't talked since their last conversation, in which Regulus just casually stated that they would have been together if their lives had gone differently.

At first, James had been *ecstatic* about it, then inevitably got upset when he realized that it would never, *could* never, be a reality for them. What's more heartbreaking to James than all the things he could easily picture for that life they'll never get to live is all the things he *can't* picture. The little details he'll never get to know. The different paths they could have taken that he can't even imagine, because they'll never get close to it.

Frankly, it's devastating. James wants something solid, some sort of foundation he can cling to, no matter how much it hurts. Would they have gotten married? It's a niggling thought in the back of James' mind, and he's been working up the courage to ask for a bit now. He's fully expecting rejection.

He isn't expecting Regulus to trip.

As soon as the words leave his mouth, Regulus goes down like a sack of bricks, cursing under his breath as he falls. James' eyes bulge, and he rushes over, but Regulus flings a hand out and glares at him. James comes to a halt.

"What the fuck?" Regulus asks through gritted teeth as he picks himself back up and brushes himself off.

James shifts nervously. "Just, you know, wondering, is all."

"Well, stop wondering," Regulus says with a huff, whipping around to start walking again, but not before James sees the red points high on his cheeks. Oh, he's *blushing.* James loves it when he blushes. He's the only person in the world who's ever managed to make Regulus do that.

"But I can't," James mumbles as he jogs forward to fall into step beside Regulus, who is *still* blushing. "It's on my mind, and I'll never let it go until I *know.* This is important."

"Yes, because theorizing on our *fake* life we could have had at one point in time is *so* important."

"It is, actually. I need to know. Besides, if I married you, I would be Sirius' brother-in-law. *Regulus,* do you even—oh, that would have been *perfect."*

Regulus sighs. "What are you? *Twelve?"*

"Sirius would understand," James mutters petulantly, looking up at the sky with a frown. His chest aches because he really *does* miss Sirius so fucking much. His last words—those two last sentences—still ring in his ears, bringing him such comfort. "Sirius, if you're listening, we could have been *brothers* in another life. Like, legally. On *paper.* Oh, we would have never shut up about it."

"It sounds to me like you would want to marry me just for that reason," Regulus says flatly.

James clears his throat. "It wouldn't have been the *only—"*

"You know, for a self-proclaimed romantic, you are painfully bad at this," Regulus informs him.

"Well, obviously I wouldn't marry you if I didn't *want* to marry you, Regulus. I wouldn't do that in any life, and neither would you, so I'm asking. Would you—I mean, in that other life, would you

have gotten married at all?" James asks.

"If it was you asking," Regulus murmurs, "I know I would have."

"Oh," James breathes out, filled with immediate delight and this fizzy, bubbly sense of giddiness that makes him grin. He swings his hands (and the hatchet), beaming out at nothing like a man who has just gotten the best news of his life.

Regulus glances over at him, then shakes his head and looks away. "Your ability to find things to be happy about, even in the middle of literal life or death fucking *astounds* me."

"Well, we can't all be miserable little shits like you," James teases, reaching out with his hatchet-less hand to tug on a curl of Regulus' hair. Regulus swats his hand away with a warning look, and James waggles his eyebrows at him. "Some of us like to find things worth smiling about, perhaps especially when smiling is the most difficult thing to do."

"Miserable little shits, as a rule, do not," Regulus points out dryly, and James cracks up helplessly, muffling his laugh behind his hand to try to stay quiet. Regulus' lips twitch as he looks away again, his eyes warm with humor.

There's a rustle ahead of them that makes them both stop, and a tiny bunny darts out and disappears. Regulus stares after it, then looks at James, who mutters, "Don't say it."

"Protein," Regulus says anyway.

"Innocent animals," James corrects. "They're just trying to go about their day, Reg. Literally just let them live."

"You're going to be begging me to do the exact opposite in a few days, when you're so hungry you can't think of anything else," Regulus informs him.

James huffs. "Yes, well, when we reach that point, do me a favor and make sure I don't have to...see it, please. Especially if it's a baby. I'll cry."

"I ate a snake, you know," Regulus says.

"What?" James blinks at him.

Regulus shrugs. "Well, it's protein, and it tried to kill me. I woke up to it trying to choke me, so I had it for breakfast."

"It tried to choke you?" James asks, his voice rising in pitch as he stares at him with wide eyes. "Like, to death?"

"It certainly wasn't giving me a hug, James."

"Fucking hell, just how many times have you nearly died?"

"Too many to count already," Regulus mutters, then he purses his lips as he swivels his dagger lazily—prettily—between his fingers like an afterthought. "I think you might be my good luck charm, though. I haven't gone this long without something bad happening since the games started."

"It's starting to get dark now," James points out. "And cold."

"I'm aware, but that hardly stopped things from going wrong before," Regulus says quietly. "Although, I think it will now."

"Why?"

"The only way to get to the supplies and weapons is to wait for the crimson river to ice over—or do like Evan and I did, but I doubt anyone would. The death eaters know that, so I'm fairly sure they're going back to claim the cave at night to keep others away, or possibly lure them in. They'll be hunting by day and staying at the cave by night, so we're safe from them for now. All we have to worry about is not freezing to death."

"Which would be a lot easier to do in a group setting inside a cave where there's shelter and the opportunity to burn a fire without drawing attention."

"James—"

"I think it's a good idea," James insists. "At the very least, there's safety in numbers, right? We could—I mean, maybe we could do something to...incapacitate the death eaters in some way. Like, if we all came together to form a plan…"

"Incapacitate," Regulus echoes, arching an eyebrow at him, and James grimaces. "Do you mean kill?"

"That's not what I said."

"But that's what you meant."

James clenches his jaw, grip tightening on the handle of his hatchet, and he forces himself to exhale. The truth is, he can't keep circling around reality in his mind, and wanting to get Regulus home means that there are twenty-three other people who won't be making it. As much as he'd love to be a pacifist, he knows that's not possible. Eight people are dead. Six of the remaining sixteen want *Regulus* dead. So…

"Yeah," James says softly, "that's what I meant."

"Right." Regulus flicks his eyes over James, one eyebrow lifting slightly, just a small twitch. His gaze drags down the length of James' body, then right back up. "Well, looks like you do have some survival instincts in you after all."

"So, you're in?" James asks.

"I'll think about it," is Regulus' flippant response.

~•~

Regulus is very particular about his hiding spots, and he's not changing that just because James is

around. If he doesn't like it, he can leave, which he still refuses to do.

Secretly, Regulus is grateful that James is here. He's worked it out by now that people are invested in his and James' little love story, or whatever, so there's no doubt in his mind that the gamemakers are televising every moment between them. If this is what it takes to get a break, Regulus has had enough of a hard time that he'll tolerate how annoying it is. He knows it won't last forever, but for the moment, he's basking in it.

Regulus finds a nice little spot for them to settle into for the night. It's just the ground tucked under an overhang hill that has vines and thorns grown over the front of it. They have to push past it all to get inside—James pricks his finger—but they're relatively safe and secluded inside. It's not the best for warmth, though, and they'll have to get close. They *could* risk a fire for an hour or two just to warm up, but they can't let it burn for too long, or people will be able to find them.

James is sucking on his pricked finger and pouting in the dark when he settles down, and Regulus rolls his eyes as he reaches over to tug on James' wrist. "Let me see. Oh, it's fine, you big baby. You're not even bleeding."

"Still hurt," James mumbles.

Regulus lets his hand go and starts digging through his bag to find the matches he has. He sits his bag aside when he finds them, and then he starts shuffling around to grab sticks and leaves and proper kindling around the small concave of earth they've tucked themselves into. When he looks back up, James is pawing through his bag curiously.

"What are you doing?" Regulus asks.

"Looking through your stuff," James replies simply, drawing each item out one at a time. "Water canister, tiny flashlight, compass, tape—ooh, small first-aid kit, nice."

"It's just bandages and a bit of antiseptic," Regulus says.

James hums. "Better than nothing. Let's see… Oh, a blanket. Just one. Not very...big." He looks up. "Are we—"

"No, James, I'm going to leave you out in the cold," Regulus cuts in sarcastically.

"Well, I didn't want to *assume* that we'd share," James tells him with a small smile. "We'll have to get close."

Regulus looks away, fiddling restlessly with his dagger, doing his absolute best to ignore it. That flutter. Damn that flutter in his chest. He *recognizes* it. "Warmer that way."

"It is that," James agrees, sounding ridiculously cheerful about the fact that they're going to be freezing tonight. "Alright, there's one more thing at the…" There's a pause, and Regulus looks over to see James holding up a pair of handcuffs, his eyebrows throwing a party with his hairline. "Well, now what's *this* about? Handcuffs, Regulus?"

"Oh, fuck off. It was in the bag," Regulus grumbles. *"I* didn't pick them out. What would I even do with them?"

James swings them around his finger, eyes sparkling. "I can think of a few things. Actually, if you want to get creative—"

"Shut up," Regulus says, reaching out to snatch the handcuffs and stuff them back into the bag, glaring at James, who just grins at him. "In case it escaped your notice, the whole world is watching you insinuate—things, including your parents. Is this how you want to present yourself to them, hm?"

"Mum, Dad, look away, I'm having impure thoughts," James announces, gasping theatrically as he presses the back of his hand to his forehead. "Oh, the *shame."*

Regulus tries so hard not to laugh, he *really* does, but it bubbles up past his lips anyway. He ducks his head forward and pinches the bridge of his nose, shaking his head like he can shake away his smile. It doesn't really work, and then James' head is propped on his thigh, head turned so he can look up at Regulus with that infuriatingly lovely grin of his.

James is just leaning over on his side and elbow on the cold, hard ground, but he looks rather peaceful with his head pillowed on Regulus' thigh, gazing up at him. Regulus looks down at him and fights valiantly not to remember being fourteen and utterly enamored with him.

He fails.

"I really do miss your glasses, you know," Regulus whispers, dropping his hand down beside James' head, careful not to touch. James blinks up at him, and Regulus *does* miss his glasses. Seeing James without them is disarming, in a way, because James' eyes are big and warm and framed by the prettiest eyelashes Regulus has ever seen.

With his glasses, that's harder to make out, almost like a secret. Regulus has always known it, and it felt like *his* knowledge, and his alone. He hates that it's so obvious to everyone now, because it was *his* discovery first. He had so few ways to claim James in his youth, so he instinctively clung to whatever he could, and the muted beauty of James' eyes behind his glasses was one of them.

Also, James just looks unfairly good with his glasses.

"Me too," James says softly, with a pained sort of smile like he may never see his glasses again, and the thought wrenches at Regulus' heart before he can smother the sensation.

Taking a steadying breath, Regulus shoves the feeling away, because that's *dangerous.* James won't see his glasses again. He can't. Regulus has to accept that. "You know what else I miss? Heaters. I would kill for a heater right now."

"Er, I sure hope not."

"I meant metaphorically. Well, mostly."

James snorts. "I love it when you threaten my life. Really sets the mood, Reg."

"Yes, I thought so, too," Regulus quips back, lips twitching when James starts shaking against him with silent laughter.

"You could start the fire," James suggests, when he calms.

"I want to wait until it gets colder. If last night is any indication of what we should expect, we don't want to have to put the fire out too early," Regulus mumbles.

"The blanket, then?"

"That's fine."

James looks up at him for a moment longer, and Regulus has to ball his hand into a fist down by his leg so he won't do something as foolish as running his fingers through James' hair. Oh, he used to *dream* of doing that when he was younger, caught in a daze more often than not until Sirius was snapping his fingers in front of his face and telling him to come back to earth. James would laugh each time, and he always winked if Sirius wasn't looking, like he knew exactly what Regulus was doing. Not that it was hard to work out, considering that Regulus was staring at James' hair wistfully like a little idiot.

It's been ten years. Regulus is no longer that little idiot, so the impulse to touch can fuck off, is what it can do. He keeps his hand balled into a fist and looks away, and eventually James pulls himself up to grab the blanket after putting everything back in the bag, excluding the matches. He scoots himself up and backwards, tucking the blanket around himself and holding the rest of it up so Regulus can slide in.

James is a line along the dirt wall, meaning the open space in front of him is where Regulus is meant to go. That means Regulus will be closest to the fire when he starts it, which James surely did on purpose. Regulus gives him a *look,* and this only earns him a sweet, lopsided smile from one James Potter.

As always, it feels like he doesn't deserve it.

"Come here," James murmurs, and so Regulus does.

It's some sort of cruel irony how good it feels. Despite the cold, despite being in the arena, despite all the fear and horror and grief, there's still so much comfort in this. In James' arms. He'd always known there would be, all the way back when he was just a child with hopeless feelings. A part of him is gratified to know that he was right, to know that, no matter the circumstances, if he could just have James' arms around him, he would be alright. A part of him hates it, too.

Regulus closes his eyes and sinks into James anyway, wryly imagining the soft sighs and gentle coos of the people who are surely watching right now. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth, knowing that people are watching something that feels so vulnerable to him. A moment where he gets to let his guard down, just a bit, and they're all *witnessing* it. He hates it. He hates that he's having this moment at all, that they're thriving on it, no doubt, and he can't stop himself from enjoying it, too.

Sometimes, Regulus becomes uncomfortably aware of how human he is. How weak and brittle he can be. How tired he can get. How he has wants and needs just like everyone else, no matter how hard he fights to rise above such things. He's never felt more human than he does right now, James' arms around him and Avery's gushing throat flashing behind his eyelids. The ultimate tenderness and the grotesque violence, both like a stain on his soul he can't get free of.

"Go to sleep, love," James whispers, sweeping a hand down his back. "I'll wake you when you need to start the fire."

"James?" Regulus rasps.

"Yes?"

"I killed a man yesterday."

There's a long beat of silence, and then James releases a deep breath, sliding his hand up further to cup the back of Regulus' neck, gently squeezing it. "I know."

"I don't think he was a good man," Regulus admits, and he sounds fragile, like he might shatter at any second.

"Well, considering that he was trying to kill you, I can safely say he wasn't," James murmurs.

Regulus swallows harshly. "James?"

"Yes?" James asks, and his tone is heavy.

"I—" Regulus' words catch, and he has to blink rapidly past the stinging in his eyes. "I don't think I'm a good man either."

"It was self-defense," James reminds him gently.

"But I'm so glad I'm alive," Regulus chokes out, and that's it. He loses it immediately, the tears building until they're overflowing, and he tips his face forward to hide it against James' throat and shoulder so all those people watching won't be able to see. He remains quiet, refusing to let them hear, but James can feel it. Regulus knows he can. The shaking, the hot tears on his skin, the way Regulus bites his jacket to make sure no noise escapes at all.

"If that makes you a bad man, then I am too, because so am I," James whispers, pulling him closer. "So am I. You have no idea how fucking grateful I am that you're alive."

"I'd never—that was the closest I'd ever been to—" Regulus sucks in a deep breath, his whole body trembling. "No. That's a lie. Before—even before the arena, I saw—"

"Regulus?" James asks cautiously.

Swallowing thickly, Regulus croaks, "Before I came up into the arena, I was waiting to get ready, and Gideon—"

~•~

Dorcas frowns as she watches the camera abruptly cut to black, the rest of Regulus' whispered words going unheard. Instead, the video feed switches to Evan, who's up in a tree and nodding off. Apparently not interesting enough, the camera cuts to the group hiding in the cave.

Beside her, Marlene goes tense. One of hers is in there. Vanity. She's tucked up between Peter and Irene, close to the fire and still shivering violently. The other one—Mathias—they're sleeping back-to-back with her to try and share warmth. Irene's mentor had sent her warm soup, which they'd all shared, because their traps hadn't caught anything yet.

The camera cuts again to a man by himself, who's wide awake and shivering as he huddles close to his own fire, then it cuts away to another girl, around Vanity's age, who has literally dug herself a hole in the ground to shelter herself in. She's the one who carries around a stick like she's itching to use it and also the one who stomped on a frog earlier, then cooked it to eat.

The last lone tribute is...not looking great. A woman who's curled up in a tight ball as she frantically tries to get a fire going, despite her shaking hands. She hasn't had any water, and she stopped begging her mentor to send her some hours ago. Marlene releases a quiet sigh.

"She's not making it through the night, is she?" Dorcas asks.

"No," Marlene murmurs, "she's not. She's not hydrated enough to regulate her body temperature, and she's not going to be able to get the fire started. She'll be dead within five hours. Over the next five hours, really. It'll be slow. Painful."

Dorcas is a Hallow like no other, and she knows that. She's never been one to shy away from the horrors and misgivings of the Hallow, as well as the Hallows who live within. That being said, the dead tone in which Marlene speaks—how lifeless she sounds—is enough to unnerve even Dorcas.

It's the fact that Marlene knows what it's like to be thirsty, to nearly freeze to death. Dorcas remembers her games. She came so close to dying so many times that it's a miracle she's here now. Freezing nearly got her in the end, and if it hadn't been for the fire she found one person at, she might not have made it. The person hadn't been willing to share, and Marlene looked like an easy target—cold and shaking and hungry—so they tried to kill her. Dorcas vividly remembers being very sure that the 'McKinnon girl' was about to die, only to be stunned when that 'McKinnon girl' shoved someone twice her size right into the fire and warmed herself up while they burned.

Marlene's not your typical girl, that's for sure.

"Hodge," Marlene breathes out when the camera cuts one final time to the death eaters.

Dorcas' heart clenches at the strain in Marlene's voice. It's only night two, and she's surprised her tributes have made it as far as they have already, which Dorcas notes has only made her more stressed as her hope starts to take root. Vanity is fifteen and surrounded by people who are doing everything to help her survive. Hodge is fourteen and surrounded by people who aren't, *but* he's possibly as safe as he can be, given the circumstances. Being with the death eaters isn't very morally upright, but in Hodge's case, it's how he can survive longer.

The death eaters—like Regulus predicted, Dorcas can't help but note, shamelessly proud of how smart he is—are back at the cave now that the river is iced over. They've got a fire going, and they're taking their time going through all the supplies and weapons. Mulciber has pounded two sticks into the ground, tilting them towards each other at the top, then twining a smaller twig to connect them in an undeniable *A*.

That *A* remains on the screen until the camera fades out to reveal Rita Skeeter, who starts the closing segment for the night. Marlene releases her first full breath for what's likely the first time tonight, since they left the party. Dorcas gets the remote and cuts Rita off, in no mood to hear her mouth.

Silence falls around them, thick and heavy. Dorcas wonders if Marlene regrets coming with her here when they left the watch party, because she's just sitting here with a Hallow who literally works with these people that are sent into an arena to die. Marlene has been very composed for the most part, and Dorcas had hoped that she could be a source of comfort, if nothing else, but now she's wondering if she made a mistake.

The *Hallow is Hollow* necklace she's wearing suddenly feels so much heavier.

They didn't leave the party too long after Sirius did. In fact, they were mostly with him, especially during that time when Regulus was being chased by a fucking spider with Avery's face. Dorcas is pretty sure that Sirius nearly burst into tears when Regulus hit the ground right before the river, sending the spider into the water. He'd had to bend over and press his hand to his chest, winded and laughing breathlessly at the same time and cadence as his brother on the screen. Dorcas remembers rubbing his back and feeling how hard and fast his heart was thumping, and she remembers thinking that it had to be *very* hard and fast if she could feel it from his *back.*

Nonetheless, Sirius did leave after James and Regulus reunited, which the entire party had been buzzing about. This early in the games, wasting sponsors on something would be too much of a risk, especially when things are sure to get much worse down the line. The gamemakers were already chattering about what they were hoping the tributes would find, or get into, or do. One way or another, things are going to happen.

Mostly, though, everyone was *very* excited about Regulus and James. No one quite knows how Regulus feels for James, so they're all invested in cheering James on in winning him over. Hoping for love. It makes Dorcas want to scream at them all, because how can that source of entertainment be more important to them than these people's *lives?*

Marlene stuck around to sweet-talk some more sponsors, trying so fucking hard to get *someone* to help her at least send Vanity a blanket. No one would go for it, though. Not one fucking person would offer up anything.

Dorcas would have, if she could. She'd give every damn bit of her money to Marlene, to Sirius, to the mentor of that woman who isn't going to survive the night. But there's a specific process it takes to become a sponsor, and not every Hallow qualifies. Dorcas is among those that don't, though she suspects that's because she would donate too much. It's a delicate balance, the way these games are run, and there's nothing delicate about Dorcas. She's bold, always.

In the end, defeated and exhausted, Marlene had come back to Dorcas to tell her that she was leaving, but it was nice talking to her. This is when Dorcas—bold as she is—outright asked if she'd

like to come back to her suite and watch the games with her, in case she didn't want to be alone. She said it just like that, laying it all out, and Marlene had only paused for one moment before she nodded and followed her out the door.

And here they are. Dorcas wonders if Marlene feels less alone. She doesn't think Marlene does, and she can't even blame her.

"Marlene," Dorcas murmurs, turning to look at her.

"Yeah?" Marlene replies, her voice hoarse.

"Tell me what I can do to help you," Dorcas says simply, because that's what it comes down to, and she'll do whatever it is that Marlene needs from her.

Marlene glances at her, eyebrows furrowed. "Are you worried about them? Regulus and James, I mean?"

"Yes," Dorcas admits. "They're—I care about them."

"Can you care about Hodge and Vanity, too?" Marlene asks, and the words come out thick, a shiny layer starting to form on her eyes. "I'm so tired of being the only one."

Dorcas reaches out to grab her hand, only briefly startled by how tightly Marlene grips it back, clinging to it. "You're not the only one. I care about them, too. Hodge is safe right now. Vanity—she's strong, and she'll make it through to the morning again, Marlene. I care. I promise I care."

A wet breath escapes Marlene's mouth, nearly a whine, and then she folds forward into Dorcas like she's not strong enough to hold herself up anymore. Dorcas immediately lets her hand go to wrap her arms around her instead, stroking her hair and letting her cry, her own eyes stinging.

It's such a harrowing thing, utter desolation, because Marlene is doing something, anything, *everything* for these children, and everyone else is doing—nothing. Dorcas can tell how tired she is, how much it's weighing on her, how it's stripping her piece by piece until she's too worn down to pretend to be anything else. It's Dorcas' first year involved in this outside of being a viewer, but it's Marlene's *third* year of being a mentor, and the insight to how awful it is makes Dorcas want to set the entire Hallow on fire—well, more than she already does.

"Thank you," Marlene chokes out as she pulls away. "Thank you for caring about them. Dorcas—"

"Shh, it's okay," Dorcas murmurs, reaching up to cup her face and gently wipe away her tears. Her stomach twists with the knowledge that they've come to live in a world where caring about people —living, breathing people whose names are picked in an unfortunate stroke of bad luck—is so rare that she's being *thanked* for it.

How did it come to this? Why isn't it normalized to the point that it's *expected?* Dorcas doesn't know how to explain to other Hallows that they should just *care about people,* no matter what, without question. She tries to, through fashion and expression, one of the few things that seems to move Hallows and make them *feel* something past their own privilege.

"They're all okay." Marlene releases a scratchy laugh and reaches up to scrub at her face, clearing her throat. She cleans herself up and blows out a deep breath, eyes sinking shut as her shoulders slump. "For now, they're all okay."

"Yeah, they are," Dorcas agrees, her gaze turning back to the blank screen, eyebrows furrowing. Again, her mind turns back to Regulus and James, their final conversation.

"Dorcas?" Marlene asks quietly.

"Did that ending seem—strange to you?" Dorcas murmurs cautiously, glancing back at Marlene, who frowns. "When they cut away from Regulus and James, I mean. Why would they do that when everyone is chomping at the bits for every little second of screen time for them? They were still talking."

Marlene opens her mouth, then closes it, then eyes Dorcas with a more judgemental frown. "Well, it was a heavy moment, Dorcas. Emotional. They deserved their privacy. Surely you don't think you were entitled to—"

"No, I don't, but *they* do," Dorcas cuts in, shaking her head as she glances back to the screen. "The gamemakers. The viewers. The sponsors. The higher powers, whatever you want to call them. They had to have been salivating over that moment between James and Regulus, so *why would they cut it?"*

"You think they...did it on purpose?" Marlene says, sounding confused.

Dorcas frowns. "He mentioned Gideon. You heard that, right? Regulus mentioned him."

"Yeah."

"Why would he do that when he was talking about death?"

Marlene blinks. "Um, I...don't know? Maybe Gideon gave him advice? You said Gideon was close with Regulus, while Fabian was close with James."

"I haven't seen them in two days," Dorcas says, gaze fixed on the black screen as her mind ticks over like a timer *almost* about to go off. "The first day is one thing. Everyone watches the first day of the games on their own, that's normal, but they should have been at the party today. I thought maybe they had just taken the first day hard because they were so worried about James and Regulus, so maybe they got drunk and weren't feeling well afterwards, which is dangerously close to what *I* almost did, if I'm honest, so I wouldn't blame them. This is—it's a lot harder when it's—when you're—"

"In it?" Marlene asks softly.

Dorcas' gaze snaps over to her, and she can feel her face soften as Marlene gives her a slightly bitter smile. "Yeah, that."

Marlene's smile falls, and she doesn't say anything else. They stare at each other, their hands tangled loosely in Marlene's lap where they'd fallen after wiping away her tears. Slowly, a fire not unlike the one she pushed someone into starts to grow in Marlene's eyes, and her nails push into the skin of Dorcas' palm. Dorcas can almost *taste* her resentment.

"Do you hate me, then?" Dorcas challenges.

"I hate the Hallow. I hate Riddle. I hate—" Marlene stops, and she gives a rueful chuckle. "I *want* to hate you, but I'm finding that rather difficult to do. You may not be like the rest of the Hallows, but you're still a Hallow, Dorcas. I *should* hate you."

"Is that so?" Dorcas says, arching an eyebrow.

Marlene scoffs and digs her nails in harder. "Don't pretend that you don't watch the games from a position of safety. Don't pretend you never *enjoyed* them."

"When I was a child, I did enjoy them," Dorcas admits. "It was the biggest event of the year. They threw parties and parades. People praised their favorite tributes, and cried when they died, then picked a favorite out of those that were left. The other students at school would gossip about their favorites, and new trends would start that the tributes created, and yes, I enjoyed them, but then I grew the fuck up."

"You—" Marlene blinks, her nails going slack, likely from surprise. "What?"

"I grew up," Dorcas repeats. "What were you expecting? Some tragic backstory where I found my whole worldview changing because something significant happened to change my mind? No. I literally just *grew up.* I got old enough to have the critical thinking skills to look past all the propaganda to wonder to myself, *what if that was me?* It's called basic fucking *decency,* Marlene. Not many Hallows are decent people, but I'm one of the few, and I'm not going to act like I'm not when you want a punching bag. You want a Hallow to lash out at, is that it?"

"Dorcas," Marlene says, an edge to her voice.

"I *know* I'm a Hallow," Dorcas continues sharply. "That doesn't mean I don't care, or that I'm not capable of caring without seeing how the other side lives, as it were. Why do you think I got into fashion? You don't think I'm not angry that *no one* cares, Marlene? It's fucking exhausting, I know, but I have to do *something.* You have no *idea* what I've—" She halts, then exhales and shakes her head. "My point is, being angry at the Hallows, that's *fair.* I'm angry, too, and I *am* a damn Hallow. But don't be angry at a Hallow that wants to help. We're rare enough as it is. So, if you want a Hallow to lash out at, maybe take the time to let me know I'm your target, yeah?"

"What, so you can stand still?" Marlene asks sarcastically.

"Maybe," Dorcas replies, keeping her voice low. She holds Marlene's gaze. "How do you know I wouldn't gladly hold still for you if you don't even ask?"

Marlene's eyes drop to her mouth, then dart right back up, her jaw clenching like she's frustrated by the slip. "With how angry I am, I don't really think I'll be all that gentle."

"Maybe I like it rough," Dorcas shoots back, letting her eyes droop as a slow smile spreads across her face. Marlene is coiled tight with all the grace of a predator about to pounce, and Dorcas is practically taunting her to leap.

"There's not that much space between rough and wrong, you know," Marlene says, taking a deep breath as she leans back, pulling her hands away. "You're right. You've been so kind, and I can't place the blame of all Hallows on you. Your work is incredible, did you know that? It's seen as radical and borderline traitorous, but it's—it's *important,* so don't think for a second that I'm ignorant to what you do and have been doing since before you became an official stylist. And you care. You *genuinely* care, and that's important, too. Dorcas, I'm sorry."

Dorcas quirks a small smile, her chest warm. "I get the anger. Sometimes I look in the mirror and feel it when I see my reflection, and not just because I'm a Hallow, but because I'm furious with myself for not figuring out how to sneak my way into Riddle's safe little castle and put a bullet in his brain while he's asleep. Yet. But *one day…"*

"Oh, so we have the same anger issues about the same things. Nice to know," Marlene teases, and the tension starts to fade into something calm.

"I'm not against working through some of those anger issues with you," Dorcas says lightly, because she would very much like to get the sexual tension *back,* thank you.

It works. Marlene inhales sharply, then once again studies Dorcas' mouth like she's figuring out the perfect spot to *bite.* When she exhales, she mutters a warning, "I haven't been with anyone since my games, Dorcas. I still—I don't know how to be gentle sometimes."

"Well, if you want to be with me," Dorcas says, slow and syrupy as she leans back on her elbows, eyelids drooping in the most blatant *fuck me* look she can make, "it's like I said. Maybe I like it rough."

"Can you throw a punch?" Marlene asks.

Dorcas is admittedly a little startled by this, so much so that she briefly pauses her whole seduction technique. "What?"

"Can you?"

"Um. Yes?"

Marlene crooks an eyebrow. "You don't sound so sure."

"I can...theoretically throw a punch," Dorcas says sheepishly. Her fists are admittedly not her usual choice of weapon.

"Right." Marlene's mouth twitches, and then she shifts to the side to plant her feet on the floor, spreading her legs a little and propping one leg higher than the other. She proceeds to tap it and watch Dorcas with a tiny smirk tugging at the corners of her lips. "Well? Come on."

"Oh," Dorcas murmurs the moment she realizes, and then she hikes up the sides of her dress and knee-walks over to Marlene before easing into her lap, straddling her elevated thigh.

"If I get too mean, or I panic and have some sort of flashback to the arena, think you're trying to kill me or something, then you're going to fling yourself off my lap, pick that bottle up off the table, and smash it over my head," Marlene says.

"I am absolutely not going to do that," Dorcas replies.

Marlene sighs. "For your own *safety,* Dorcas. I told you, I haven't done this since before the arena, so I—I just want to be sure. That's all."

"We don't have to do this, you know," Dorcas says softly, reaching out to gently push Marlene's hair back from her shoulder, revealing the faded scar on the side of her throat.

"I know, and if you've decided you don't want to, then that's fine," Marlene responds calmly. She's really quite relaxed, actually, not seeming bothered by Dorcas in her lap and eyeing her scar at all. "But I do want to, if you still want to. I'm a person, and I should be able to do these things just like anyone else. I just—I don't know how it will go, because you'll be the first. I don't *think* it will go wrong, but I can't be sure until…"

"Right, well, you let me be the judge of what I can and cannot handle, alright?" Dorcas declares firmly.

"Oh, I'm sure you're more capable than anyone knows," Marlene murmurs, gaze dropping down to where her hand cups Dorcas' bent knee before slowly sliding up her leg. Her grip is firm, not light and teasing.

Dorcas chuckles breathlessly. "You have *no* idea."

With that, she rocks forward to duck in and kiss Marlene with enough force and intensity that her head tips back. It's their first kiss, and it is not gentle, or tentative, or sweet. It's *hot* and sharp, a little rough, but not enough to hurt. Marlene does bite her lip, and Dorcas' head spins as soon as she does it. The kiss has no concept of zero to one hundred when there was no zero to start with; it's immediate one hundred from the moment their lips meet, open-mouthed and desperate.

Marlene's hand clamps down on her thigh, digging in hard, and then she's shoving her hand up further, with more urgency, pushing at Dorcas' dress to grab onto her side and fully just haul her closer. Dorcas kisses her harder as a reward, and then she's the one that gets a prize, because Marlene releases this lovely little moan that drags out into a full-blown *whimper,* and Dorcas has never gotten so hot *everywhere* so quickly in her life. In the next second, she's frantically tugging at her dress, carelessly trying to snatch it off.

"Off?" Marlene mumbles as she pulls away from the kiss, her hand twisting the fabric of Dorcas' dress like she's about to rip the fucking thing to shreds.

Dorcas swats at the side of her hand, and Marlene instantly lets go, blinking up at her almost like a kicked puppy. Dorcas sways back to reach around to unzip her dress. "I make nearly everything I wear, so there will be *no* ripping of my clothes when we're together, yeah? I won't have my time and energy wasted just because you're trying to fuck me faster."

"Say fuck me again," Marlene breathes out.

"Fuck me," Dorcas repeats, slower this time.

Marlene groans and folds forward to latch onto the side of Dorcas' neck, sucking harshly and nipping a line down to her shoulder. She pulls back quickly when she realizes Dorcas is shimmying out of her dress, though. Her hands slip up the side of Dorcas' body like she's pretending to help, but all she's really doing is feeling all the new skin that's revealed.

"Dorcas, you are *flawless,"* Marlene whispers reverently, her eyes practically all pupil as Dorcas

lazily lets her dress pool to the ground behind her. "Did you plan this? Your knickers match your—wait, is that a *set?* You did plan this."

Dorcas snorts, because she can't help it. "Actually, no. Some of us just like to wear sets. This is one of my favorites."

"I can see why," Marlene says, gaze firmly latched onto Dorcas' chest like you couldn't pry it away with a crowbar.

"Eyes up here, sweetheart," Dorcas teases, reaching up to slowly drag her fingers through Marlene's hair.

Marlene's eyes do come up to meet hers, eventually, *slowly.* She shakes her head. "You're like a fucking siren. This is—you are—fuck, I would *absolutely* drown myself trying to swim out to you."

"Anyone else would be alarmed by such a compliment, but I would like you to know that I am *very* flattered," Dorcas informs her as she dips in to press kisses along Marlene's jaw, heading right back to her mouth, drawn there again and again.

Marlene is grinning when Dorcas' mouth finds hers, and they're right back to it, but this time with less clothes in the way. Marlene takes advantage, her hands running all over Dorcas, mapping her body out but never lingering for long, like she's too overwhelmed by what else there is to stop in one place. Dorcas grinds down against Marlene's thigh, which was the whole point to this position to begin with—this isn't her first thigh-riding experience, so she's already in the know.

She does it once, twice, resituates herself, then does it again and *moans.* Yes, there. Right there. Marlene breaks away with a low hum, her mouth trailing down Dorcas' throat as her hands grasp her hips. Her grip is tight, and she starts to tug and pull at a ruthless pace, making Dorcas' head fall back as her mouth falls slack and her eyes fall shut.

"Don't pull my hair," Marlene whispers into her clavicle, then nips at her skin before mouthing her way down to the dip and curve of her chest.

Dorcas goes to great efforts to unclench her fingers from Marlene's hair and grab onto her shoulders instead, fully aware that she can't trust herself *not* to yank on Marlene's hair at the moment. Her body is writhing of its own accord, her chest heaving. She feels like she's burning inside and out.

A shrill ring pierces the air, and Dorcas freezes. Marlene mumbles something like *ignore it* into her chest, where she's apparently trying to smother herself, and Dorcas would love nothing more...except she knows that ringtone.

"Fuck. I have to take this," Dorcas pants out, and Marlene groans but dutifully falls back, equally breathless. Dorcas leans in and presses a quick kiss to her mouth. "Give me one second, and then we'll be right back to it, I promise."

Marlene nods and leans her head back with a hum, watching Dorcas through half-lidded eyes, face flushed and mouth swollen. She looks so good that Dorcas finds it a genuine struggle to rip herself away, but she forces herself to. She moves over to answer the call, only standing across the room. Even with her back towards Marlene, Dorcas can feel her gaze roaming all over her body.

There's a beat of silence, then, "Patronus?"

"Starfish," Dorcas replies quietly, so quiet that she won't be overheard.

"Fabian and Gideon are dead. They got them," is the reply, and then the line clicks.

Dorcas stands there for a long moment, just breathing as she stares at the wall. Something inside her cracks open, and she squeezes her eyes shut so tight that spots dance behind her eyelids. Her fist curls in front of her, nails biting into her palm until she's sure that she's not going to make a noise.

Slowly, she exhales and opens her eyes. She swallows the lump in her throat. *Oh, Fabian, Gideon, not you,* she thinks, that space in her chest cracking open wider. Not them. They were being so careful. How did it go wrong? Why—

Dorcas blinks hard and rolls her jaw, peeling her hand out straight and forcing her body to relax. She keeps her voice level as she says, "Yeah, thanks for letting me know."

With that, she drops her hand, sits her cell down, and takes one more second. She taps her finger to the table beside her phone, then turns around.

"Everything alright?" Marlene asks.

"Yeah. That was just Fabian. He and Gideon got too attached to Regulus and James, and they couldn't handle all of this, so they decided to leave and try a different career path. Can't say I blame them, really. It's—hard, as you know," Dorcas murmurs as she pads back over.

Marlene frowns. "It is, but running away from it doesn't change anything."

"They're good men," Dorcas whispers. "Wherever they are, I hope they find peace."

"Is it…?" Marlene's face softens. "You were close with them. I'm sure you're going to miss them."

"Very much," Dorcas confirms and forces herself to smile.

"If you're not—if you don't want to continue, we don't have to, Dorcas," Marlene tells her gently. "I'll still stay. We can just—"

"No. No, it's fine. Where were we?" Dorcas says softly, sliding right back into Marlene's lap, because she has a hole in her chest and she knows exactly how to fill it.

"Right here, I think," Marlene replies, then leans in to help Dorcas do just that by kissing her.

Chapter End Notes

POV UNLOCKED!!!! *in a baseball player's voice* DORCAS IS SAAAAFE. please imagine that i just did the thing where i swing my arms through the air to indicate that dorcas is safe, like the baseball players do. (ive never played or watched baseball lmaooo)

anyway, yes, dorcas is safe!!! she will NOT be dying!!! some people thought she was gonna be cinna-ed, but she will not, in fact, be cinna-ed.

we got a looooot of information in this chapter, so ill ramble about jegulus first.

imagining james beat-boxing while strolling through the forest in a death arena is SO FUNNY to me. he's so cute, i love him. regulus is over here trying to feed them and make sure they survive, and james is just like: but they're a FAMILY, regulus

you can't kill it cause it's a BABY. in his defense, if that was me, i would literally do the same thing. bambi scarred me as a child, so i get it.

i wouldn't be surprised if a lot of people were surprised that regulus just flatout admitted that he and james would have ended up together if sirius never went into the arena, but i would like to remind everyone that this fic isn't heavy on the miscommunication. like, everything regulus says to james, he genuinely feels that way —or at least believes that he does. so, when he says that he hates james, when he thinks about how he got over james, that's all real to him.

him being blunt about what they could have been is just him being honest again and saying what he feels/believes/knows. and he's right. in this world, if sirius hadn't gone into the arena, they would have 100% ended up together, gotten married, and lived a long, semi-happy life (as happy as anyone can be in this setting, at least). but that's not what happened, which is where the angst hits. that shit is so sad to me, im not even gonna lie. like, i wrote it, and im like: damn, that's fucked up :/

but lmaoooo, regulus faceplanting when james asked if they would have gotten married 😭😭😭 GOODBYE. he was literally taken out by that question. someone help this poor man. he's just trying to live his life and survive this death arena, and then there's james being all sweet and constantly flirting with him. poor james just wants to cling to as much happiness as he can, and he's fully expecting to die at some point, so you can't really blame the guy.

then of course the Sad Time when regulus breaks down over avery. him thinking he's a bad person because he's glad to be alive, even if it meant killing someone else ☹☹☹ im SAD.

but the gideon mention...

so, back to dorcas!!! she's safeeeee, and she's...apparently more involved in Things than anyone realized. and so were gideon and fabian!!! no i will not elaborate, you will see in due time, it'll all come out eventually, but i TOLD YALL that i didn't just kill them for no reason. im excited to hear your theories, though!!!

also, dorlene my beloveds <3 we see more of them, i promise. we see some more dorcas POVs in the future as well, if that excites anyone!

also², the evan mention probably appeased many of you, as well as the vanity mention. yes, peter and vanity are just chilling with irene and mathias in a secluded cave right now. i feel like it's important to remember that james established allies with these people BEFORE the arena, so like, it's not completely out of left field for all them to be working together.

also³, yes the A that mulciber was posting on the ground was for avery.

anyways, let me shut up now. feel free to drop comments of your theories/thoughts. i adore them all, and i adore all of you the same! thank you so much <3

tributes remaining in the arena as of this chapter: 16 (still)
tributes who have died as of this chapter: dylan, avery, and six unamed/unknown others.

UPDATING ON THURSDAY

see you on thursday <3

Man Down

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death (because of the whole arena thing)
-explicit depictions of murder (yes, another person dies, and not just in the background, so i will be putting a more in-depth warning for what happens in the end notes for those of you who need/want to be more prepared)
-explicit depictions of violence (VERY explicit, and i will also be putting a more in-depth warning for what happens in the end notes for those of you who need/want to be more prepared)
-descriptions of blood
-depictions of injuries
-angst

please be warned, this is a very heavy and fast-paced chapter, and it will likely put some of you on edge/make you anxious, so take care of yourselves FIRST, always. highly recommend reading where you're settled in and can clutch a pillow or something.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What about fish?" James asks, then tosses his last berry into his mouth and raises his eyebrows at Regulus.

"How is that any less immoral?" Regulus replies, visibly unimpressed as he walks next to him.

James shrugs. "Well, you know… Er, do fish even have brains?"

"Obviously fish have brains. All living beings have brains," Regulus tells him. "Well, except for you."

"Ha!" James bursts out laughing, then immediately clamps his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. Regulus gets upset with him when he's too loud (which is often), and considering the very real danger they're in at all times, James can't blame him. It's just not exactly in James' nature to *be* quiet.

Regulus looks exasperated. "Why are you the way you are? I've just insulted you. *Why* do you find that funny?"

"Not sure," James admits, once he's calmer. "Suppose I have a few wires crossed." He pauses, then knocks his shoulder into Regulus' and sing-songs, "Or *maybe* I have a little crush, and I'm just delighted by anything you say. Sound familiar?"

"Every time you open your mouth to speak, the urge to kill you grows stronger," Regulus informs him flatly.

"You used to be so *sweet,"* James coos, and Regulus instantly scowls, which is, quite frankly, so fucking adorable that James can't stop himself from grinning. "Okay, no, do you remember when you were twelve—"

"Do *not,"* Regulus hisses, head snapping around as he glares at him, his face turning red immediately.

"No, I am. This is too brilliant. This story deserves to be heard by all," James declares. "People watching at home, settle in and prepare for the cutest fucking—"

Regulus is abruptly right in front of him, the flat part of his dagger pressed against James' mouth. His gaze is sharper than the blade. "You can live without your tongue, James, did you know that? Why don't I show you?"

"You know," James mumbles carefully, *very* carefully, "I think I really do have a knife kink of some sort. I am *so* attracted to you right now."

"I hate you," Regulus mutters, then smacks the flat part of his dagger to James' mouth before pulling it away. "Tell that story and I'll cut your fucking tongue out."

"Still attracted to you," James announces, breaking out into a grin as Regulus huffs and turns to keep walking. "And what story? How do you know it's the same story?"

"I *know* what story it is."

"Would it be the same story—"

"James," Regulus warns.

"—where you found a new route to take after school and just *had* to go collect all the pretty rocks, taking two jars, and then you gave *me* the prettiest one with a sweet little smile while you gave Sirius the other one, which was only half full, and you told him not to eat them?" James continues anyway, his voice cheerful. "That story, by chance?"

"First, I couldn't be sure that Sirius *wouldn't* eat them. He's an idiot, so that was an extremely valid thing to say to him. Second," Regulus says, swiveling his dagger between his fingers, "you really don't value your tongue, do you?"

James hums, raising his eyebrows. "Not as much as you would, if only I had the chance to prove it."

"But you don't, and you never will," Regulus reminds him, because he's so, so mean.

"Well, I don't know," James muses as he continues walking next to Regulus, "I didn't exactly expect to have a chance with...other things. Your gifts at twelve were *a lot* different than they are at twenty-five, I'll just say that."

"Yes, James, that's called maturing. I realize that it's a concept of which you have no basic understanding, but—"

"Why are *you* the way you are, hm? Let's talk about that. You're always insulting me. Feels very...pointed, and frankly, you can't expect me not to like it, because it makes me feel very singled out. Special, if you will."

"You're just desperate," Regulus says.

"Well, yes, *but* I'm no fool. You're meaner to me than anyone else." James chuckles. "Unresolved feelings, maybe?"

Regulus huffs a laugh, like he finds James' theory incredibly amusing, as if it's so absurd that it can only be funny—which is a bit of a blow, if James is honest. "Your optimism has somehow managed to circle into delusion."

"Can you blame me? I mean, your *parting gift* alone…" James looks over and catches his gaze, pleased that Regulus holds it without pretending he has no idea what James is referencing. He can't believe that Regulus is actually willing to talk to him about this. "You can't blame a bloke for the effect a gift like that can have on his greater sense."

"The goal was not to give you hope, James."

"Right, well, you mucked that up quite nicely."

"It didn't mean anything," Regulus says. "You know that."

James purses his lips, wishing he had more berries to chew on so he could bide his time to figure out the best way to respond. He settles for tossing his hatchet from hand-to-hand. "I don't know that, actually. It was indulgence, yeah?"

"Obviously."

"But just for me?"

"Did it look like I got anything out of it?" Regulus asks, but now he's looking away, and there's a certain set to his jaw…

"Oh, fuck," James breathes out, his eyes widening. "Shit, Reg, you *did* get something out of it. You __"

"James."

"You *enjoyed* it."

Regulus cuts him a sharp look, but he's already blushing, so his protests are futile. "Will you *please* just stop talking?"

"No. This is the best day of my life," James declares brightly.

"Right, and a good day for it, no doubt. A nice stroll in the woods with someone who will *never* indulge you again inside an arena where death is imminent," Regulus says sarcastically. He waves his empty hand. "Yes, what a *lovely* day."

The last word has barely left Regulus' mouth before, with an abruptness that James doesn't see coming, everything proceeds to go wrong all at once.

~•~

Something drops down from the tree above them with no warning whatsoever and slams into Regulus' back hard enough to shove him to the ground. He lands on his front and gets a mouthful of leaves and dirt for his troubles, and the weight on his back shifts desperately, leaning, *reaching…* Regulus scrambles to crawl forward and reach his dagger first, because it had slipped from his hand when he went down. A pale hand stretches past him, broad and not familiar. Regulus knows for *sure* that it's not Evan, because he has no scar on the side of his thumb the way the owner of this hand does.

The hand closes around his dagger, and the only thing Regulus can think is, *no one ever thinks to look up.*

Fuck.

Frantically, Regulus tries to buck the person on him *off,* but he only succeeds in half-turning over, the person on top rocking with the motion and using the momentum to slam Regulus to the ground flat on his back. Vaguely, Regulus recognizes the man as one that didn't really speak to anyone, and now here he is, raising Regulus' dagger up and clearly getting ready to bring it back down. Regulus scrambles to reach for his third dagger, and then a hatchet is sticking out of the man's head.

It's just *there,* suddenly. Regulus barely even saw it swing in, like he blinked and missed the moment it was buried into the man's skull. There's a hand still gripping the handle, and Regulus knows that hand. He has that hand memorized.

James.

The cannon goes off, and Regulus' dagger drops down rather anticlimactically against his chest, then slides off without even harming him. The man's face is slack, head split open around the hatchet, and there's a grotesque *crack* and a sickening squelch as the hatchet is yanked free. Blood immediately starts pouring, and the man's body slumps to the side.

Regulus scrambles up in just enough time to see James raise the hatchet again, which propels him forward to catch James' wrist before he can bring it down. James' head whips around towards him, and his eyes are wild. He's breathing hard.

"He's dead," Regulus says firmly. "James, he's dead."

"What?" James croaks, like he's confused, and Regulus realizes with a pang that he *is.* "He's—but you—are you—"

"I'm fine," Regulus murmurs, gently tugging James' hand down and slowly easing the bloodied hatchet out of his grip. He nods. "I'm perfectly fine. Not a scratch on me, see?"

James fumbles to grab Regulus' arm, patting his way up, over his shoulder, into the curve of his neck. A punched-out breath escapes him. "You're okay?"

"I'm okay," Regulus confirms.

"I thought—" James cuts himself off, choking on the rest.

Regulus nods. "I know."

James just stares at him for a long moment, his eyes wide and startlingly innocent for someone who just buried a hatchet in the side of a man's head so deep that it cracked the skull on the way back out. Regulus is uncomfortably aware of what force James must have swung with to actually manage to get the hatchet in so firmly at all. He hit that man like he was planning to take his fucking head off.

There's blood on James' hands, and Regulus steps forward to tug on the bottom of his shirt on the side where he cleaned his hands when they were the ones covered in blood. Far more gently than he did for himself, he carefully and meticulously wipes away the blood as much as he can without water and without looking, still holding James' gaze to keep him looking at him instead of his hands or the dead body on the ground.

James' fingers aren't shaking.

His voice is, though, when he says, "I thought he was going to kill you."

"He was," Regulus replies.

"Why?" James whispers.

Regulus frowns, tempted to glance at the dead man like he can glean information from him, but he refrains because James isn't looking away as long as he's holding his gaze. "I'm not sure. There could be a variety of reasons. Maybe he wanted a weapon, or he thought we had food, or he just thought he could kill us both quickly and better his odds."

"Why would he do that, though?" James insists, and his voice cracks, rising in distress. "We weren't hurting anyone. I would have helped him if he—but he just—he *attacked* you, and I—"

"James," Regulus says softly.

"I couldn't let him," James croaks. "He—he was going to kill you, and I couldn't—I can't—I had to —"

"I know," Regulus tells him yet again, because he does know, even though James can't get his words out properly. "I need you to do something else for me."

James blinks, then rasps, "Anything."

"Close your eyes," Regulus murmurs, and James does. He's shaking now, rattling from head-to-toe. "Now take five careful steps back and turn around."

Without a word, James listens to him. Regulus immediately swivels to crouch down by the man, picking up his dagger to slip in his thigh holster, then grimacing as he cleans the hatchet on the man's shirt. The sight of him is just—bad. Blood and gore. Brutal, like Regulus knew it would be.

Regulus is quick about making it back to James, pausing in front of him and just looking at him in pure sorrow. James still has his eyes closed, and his breathing is a little wobbly. Less than five minutes ago, he was flirting with Regulus with a grin bright enough to make the sun jealous. That's how fast it all happened; that's how quick everything can change.

And now, the James who never killed anyone is gone. He can never be that person again, and he let that person go without hesitating because he was protecting *Regulus.*

Regulus is so tired of seeing people destroy themselves just so he'll be safe.

"James," Regulus says, keeping his voice low and melodic, but he only speaks to give a warning before he reaches out with his free hand to slip his fingers into James'. Their fingers curl together with familiarity, slotting into place like they were made for this, like they've done this a thousand times instead of three. Regulus tugs on him. "Come with me."

James comes with him, and Regulus leads him away.

~•~

Ten people are dead. It's day three. Six by the first night. Eight by the second night, and a ninth in the middle of the night after the banners had already played in the sky. Here's the tenth. James didn't even know his name.

It's such a strange thing to be fixated on, but James feels like there's a distinct lack of honor in killing someone without even knowing their name, at least so flippantly. He didn't even hesitate, that's the thing. It happened so quickly, the man fumbling for the knife and raising it up, and it only took a measly few *seconds.* James—who fully expected to falter in such a situation—had swung the hatchet as hard as he could without even a *moment* of hesitation.

Just like that. Just that quick. Just that simple.

The baffling thing is, it's not like James made the conscious decision to do it. Yes, he was in complete control of himself, but he never had the thought, *oh, I'm going to kill this man now.* There wasn't really time for that, or any thoughts at all. It came down to one moment, faster than a breath, and it was about what James was capable of. If he wasn't capable of killing, then that would have been the moment he learned that. It wasn't, though, because James apparently *is* capable of killing, and he proved it. Effortlessly. Immediately. *Instinctively.*

He saw Regulus on the ground, seconds from death, and James killed the man. Not knowing his name, if he has a family, or friends, James just fucking *killed him.*

It's crushing to James to realize that he's capable of such a thing. He thought… Maybe it was naive of him, but he really believed that he was on the outside of it, like he and violence were parallel lines that could never cross. Oil and water. It just didn't *go together,* and James never really expected that he could do it. Sure, he told himself that he *would,* if it came down to it, but deep down in some hidden chamber within him where he's always clung to his innocence, he was convinced that it was all bravado, because him? Killing? No, never.

Never is now, forever is out of reach, and James has just killed a man. It was not self-defense. The man didn't attack him; maybe he would have, after killing Regulus, but James didn't wait long enough to find out. James killed the man in defense of Regulus, and he wonders if that should sicken him.

It doesn't.

Regulus didn't ask him to, and James makes his own choices. This choice was one he made from the beginning. He knew what it entailed. He spent *hours* thinking about it, going over every possibility in his mind to see just how far he would go to make sure Regulus makes it home. No matter what scenario crossed his mind, James' choice was always the same.

It's quiet out, excluding the random creaks of the trees and the muffled sound of running water in the distance. Regulus is leading him towards it, still holding his hand. They've been walking for a long time now, neither of them saying a word.

When James looks down at where Regulus is holding his hand, he can see blood stained on their tangled fingers.

It feels like James checks out for a bit. Like he's on autopilot. His mind feels like it's limping, like killing someone wounded his ability to function, to think, to make sense of anything. He has the disjointed thought that his parents must have seen that, as well as Sirius. The last people in the

world who would judge him for it, and he still wonders what they're thinking.

What does Regulus think? He's very quiet, and he's being startlingly gentle with James right now, more gentle than he's been in years. James feels—untethered, and Regulus keeps holding onto him, like he knows and he's determined not to let him slip away. There's something secure about him at this moment, and James just wants to sink into him and close his eyes to shut the rest of the world out.

James goes in and out like static, his brain buzzing like it's full of bees, and then they're at the stream. A new one they've never seen before. Regulus takes him to the edge of it, crouching down and encouraging James to do the same by tugging on his hand. James does, and Regulus dips their hands in the water together, keeping them touching even as he cleans the blood off. In the water, it looks pink.

"Did you know his name?" James croaks.

"No," Regulus murmurs as he pulls their hands from the water, letting them drip without doing anything else. The hatchet lying across his thigh is clean, and James isn't sure how that's even possible. It looks untouched. "Did you?"

"No," James chokes out, squeezing his eyes shut and ducking his head. He's right next to Regulus, so he ends up pressing his face into his shoulder, sucking in deep, gasping breaths.

"Shh, breathe, James," Regulus whispers tenderly, so tender, and one of his hands breaks away to cup the back of James' head. His fingers push into James' unruly hair, which makes James feel so much better and so much worse all at once.

James breathes. He's not crying. It feels like he should be; all the usual symptoms are there—the tightness in his throat, the pain in his chest, the struggle to breathe. And yet, no tears come. His eyes remain dry. Everything just hurts.

Regulus sways back a little, and James reaches up to grab his arm with both hands. "Don't leave. Regulus, please don't—"

"I'm not leaving," Regulus says softly, carding his fingers through James' hair again. "I just need to refill our water, that's all. I'm not—I'm still right here, alright? But we can't stay long. I'm sorry, James, but we have to keep going."

"Just—just give me a minute," James begs, and Regulus makes a quiet, soothing noise that sounds like agreement. Oddly, James thinks Regulus would give him anything right now.

All James wants is him.

Regulus stays true to his word. He doesn't leave or shake James off. He lets James hold onto him as he shifts around, getting his bag and drawing out the water canister. James briefly pulls away to drink some when Regulus nudges him in the head with it, insistent even when James ignores it. He drinks it and feels a little better, which makes him feel guilty for some reason, and then Regulus finishes off the rest before refilling it. He does it with James' face pressed into his shoulder and James' arms threaded around one of his, limiting his mobility quite a bit, but he never complains.

Afterwards, Regulus gives him a little more time. James turns his head and stares at the water. It's moving rapidly, a long gorge through the earth and rocks, taking everything downstream. Fresh water replaces the spot they're at every second, and James wonders where the water that contains the blood of the man he killed is at now. Gone, like the man.

"Well, isn't this sweet?"

In seconds, Regulus has the hatchet in hand as he shoots to his feet, snatching James up with him. They whip around at the same time to watch Mulciber stroll through the break in the trees, his approach unheard over the rush of the water.

Mulciber has a sword in his hands, and he's not the only one walking out of the trees. It's all the death eaters, excluding Avery, and they all have weapons. Willa and Axus are back, and Axus has a hook with a rope like they used in the training room. Even little Hodge has a weapon—just a knife, but still.

"You two," Mulciber says, pointing the tip of his sword at them, "have been hard to find. It's almost like you just wanted some time alone together. Sorry, did I break up an intimate moment?"

Regulus' nails dig into James' arm where he's gripping it. James flicks his gaze between everyone. Bernice has a sword, too. Quinn has a spear. Willa has a bow with a quiver of arrows on her back. Her hand is slowly pulling an arrow free.

"Run," Regulus whispers, a mere breath, and then his nails go slack. Immediately, he and James

whip around and crash directly into the stream, running as hard as they can while the others automatically give chase.

~•~

Run.

Run.

Run.

That's it. That's all there is. Just *running.* The world is a blur around Regulus as he pushes his legs as hard as they'll go, winding around trees and never going in a straight line. James is right next to him, his legs long enough to keep up with Regulus' speed. They're both sprinting like their lives depend on it. They do.

An arrow whips past them, landing in the trunk of a tree with a loud *thunk.* Regulus snaps it in half as he goes past, cursing under his breath when another one shoots right by him, so close that it would have hit if he hadn't stumbled a bit.

Regulus can hear the others chasing them, their feet pounding on the ground, their loud shouts and whoops of laughter. Taunting them. They have them in their sights now, and Regulus knows they're not going to stop until he and James are dead. The problem is, Regulus and James—even with weapons—can't fight them. They're outnumbered.

Crashing through the forest, Regulus can hear his heavy breathing, as well as James', and everything is going too fast for him to come up with a proper plan. Getting away is ideal, but not really feasible when the death eaters are closing in. And they are. Regulus can *hear* them getting closer.

So, just run.

Run.

Run.

Fucking *run.*

For how long? To where? Regulus doesn't know. He doesn't know what to do; he can't fucking *think.* Another arrow sails past him, nearly hitting James, who—by some miracle—evades getting it right in the back by splitting around a tree, going right as Regulus goes left. Run, run, run. What else?

Come on, *think.* What do you do when you're being hunted? When you're outnumbered and overpowered? What do you do? *Sirius, what do I do?* Regulus thinks as he gasps for air, his whole body screaming from how hard he's pushing it. No answer comes to him. Sirius isn't here.

Maybe there is no answer.

Maybe...this is it.

They can't get away. They can't climb, or hide, or run fast or far enough to evade the people who are after them. Regulus has a hatchet in his hand and two daggers strapped to his thighs. If he could take out Willa first—but no, she'd have an arrow in him the moment he stood still. If he could—

A hook buries itself in his shoulder, yanking him so hard that he's lifted clear off his feet and *slammed* to the ground with such impact that he nearly bites through his tongue. Blood fills his mouth, and he's been here before. For the second time, he swallows his own blood just to breathe, and if that isn't a perfect metaphor for survival, Regulus doesn't know what is.

Regulus, despite the suddenness of everything, is quick to react. He was just *rocked,* hard, but he still fumbles to snatch the hook out of his shoulder. It isn't very deep, but it hurts like a bitch anyway, and lovely, now there's a hole through his coat and shirt. Not the primary issue at the moment, honestly, but Regulus is enough of a miserable little shit to be angry about more than one thing at a time. See? He has talents, too.

Tossing the hook aside, Regulus scrambles to his feet to see James a few steps in front of him, his chest heaving as he turns around to look at him. Every line of his face is set, and Regulus knows he's coming back for him before James even takes one step. *I'm not leaving you,* he'd said. *You'll have to kill me.*

Even under pressure, James stays true to his word.

The issue is, the others have gained on them now. It takes twenty seconds, at most, for the group to converge on them, circling around them so they can't go anywhere. And this… Well, Regulus *knows* there's no way out of this.

But if he's going down, he's taking at least two of these bastards with him, because he's genuinely just *that* pissed off. Murderous rage floods through him, and he can recognize the feeling for what it is. After all, he is a murderer now, isn't he? This predicament has infuriated him so much that he grips the hatchet with no shame about how he's going to use it.

Regulus has all plans to fight.

And then Mulciber grabs James and pulls him in front of him, holding the sword to his throat as he grins right at Regulus.

~•~

James can safely say he doesn't have a knife kink. Blade kink. Sword kink. *Any* of that—he doesn't have it. No, it's just Regulus he likes, and anything to do with him. When Mulciber has a sword to his throat, it's not sexy at all.

Holding very still, James stares at Regulus, who looks—well, frankly, he looks rather terrifying, but in a sexy way. Now really isn't the time, and maybe James is just biased, as well as a bit hysterical from the rising panic that's taking root, because *oh, fuck, he's about to die, he's about to fucking die.*

Regulus is bleeding from his shoulder, but he's standing like he's perfectly unharmed and completely willing to fuck shit up. His gaze is latched right onto Mulciber, no one else, and his eyes are *cold.* It's admittedly a bit disturbing, because James knows his eyes, and he hasn't ever seen anything like this in them before. Yes, when James discovered him, he looked ready to kill. This is different.

Regulus has fucking *murder* in his eyes. It's cold and calculating, a window into the no doubt chilling thoughts that are rolling through his mind right now. It's bad enough that James almost feels...concern for Mulciber.

"No, no, leave him," Mulciber says, and Bernice steps back from where she was about to grab Regulus. "He's not going to do anything. I've got his boyfriend, don't I?"

"He looks *angry,"* Willa sing-songs, an arrow docked in her bow and ready to set loose as soon as she lifts it. She sounds so young. James thinks she's Vanity's age. "Kill him, Mulciber. What are you waiting for?"

"Not yet," Mulciber snaps. "Go on, Black. I want to know how you did it. How you killed Avery. When we made it to him, they were already lifting his body out."

"I can show you better than I can tell you," Regulus declares sharply, an edge to his voice that makes James' heart skip a beat for a moment.

Mulciber snarls in James' ear. "I've known Avery my whole fucking *life,* you worthless cunt. You're going to tell me what you did to him, or I'm going to cut your boyfriend's pretty face up one little slice at a time."

"If you so much as make him *flinch,* they'll be lifting you out in pieces," Regulus warns, and James swallows, because that's his *I'm not fucking around* voice. He. Oh, he actually means that.

"Is that so, Black?" Mulciber laughs, and then the sword raises up to press against James' cheek. He drags it slowly, pressing in *hard,* and James hisses as he flinches back, but Mulciber just snatches him by the hair and holds him in place.

"Ow, *fuck,"* James grits out, wanting so badly to *fight,* but one wrong move could cost him his eye, or more importantly, it could cost Regulus his life.

James struggles to no avail, and the slice goes up the side of his face until Mulciber puts the sword back to his throat. It stings and aches, a line of heat that blood slips free from, pooling down to his jaw and in the crevice of his neck. His face is twisted into a grimace, but he can still see how stiff Regulus is, his jaw clenched and his nostrils flared wide.

"Do you want to talk now, or should I do that again?" Mulciber asks. "No? Here, let me just—"

"Don't," Regulus snaps, taking a step forward.

"Ah, ah, ah," Mulciber sing-songs. "Come any closer and he'll be *swallowing* the sword, yeah?" Regulus stops. "There we go. Got you on a leash now, don't I? Didn't your brother tell you not to reveal your weakness, Black, or is he as useless as you?"

Regulus gets *visibly* more pissed off at the insult to his brother, and James can relate. James also remembers when Regulus was thirteen, and one of his classmates called Sirius an idiot to his face. It wasn't at school, but rather in the middle of the market, and James was with Sirius. Regulus had wandered off, no doubt going to browse for a new journal, and when they went to find him, a boy was essentially bullying him.

James and Sirius had started over at the same time, both ready to do the same thing, but they never got the chance. Regulus was generally quiet around other people, a bit shy, and he honestly didn't *like* most people who weren't—well, James, basically. Sirius is his brother, so that's a little different.

Anyway, they got close enough to see Regulus being a snarky little shit, because for all that he was shy, he wasn't afraid to verbally rip someone to shreds if they were annoying him, even then. The boy said, "You won't do anything, especially when your idiot brother isn't around," and he'd barely finished talking before Regulus punched him in the face so hard that he crashed into the table of—predictably—journals. Regulus kept right on hitting him, too, at least until Sirius and James pulled him off and dragged him away before the Aurors got involved.

After all that verbal abuse the boy threw at him, it was one offhand comment about Sirius that set Regulus off.

In short, if Regulus gets his hands on Mulciber, he's *fucked.*

For some reason, this makes James laugh. This isn't really the situation where laughter is appropriate, but it bubbles up anyway. He can't help it. He's under a lot of stress, his face hurts, and he's terrified that they're about to die—and he still laughs, because oh, Mulciber is going to regret that.

"Something funny, Potter?" Mulciber asks sharply, yanking him by his hair to get him to shut up again.

James grinds his teeth, but nevertheless says, "You're an idiot. Mercy on your soul, Mulciber, because you just made a very big mistake. You think Regulus cares about *me?* No. No, *Sirius* is

his weakness, and you fucking fool, he's *not here."*

"James," Regulus says sharply, and that's all he says, but that's all he *has* to say. The unspoken command rings loud and clear.

With a grunt, James recklessly presses into the sword, getting a sharp—but thin—slice for his troubles, all so he can toss his head back into Mulciber's face. Mulciber curses sharply and rocks back, his hand lifting slightly, which James turns his head to clamp down on hard enough that he tastes blood.

The sword hits the ground, and James lunges for it as Mulciber stumbles back with a shout. He gets it in his hand and sucks in a sharp breath as something glints out of the corner of his eye. Bernice is there, sword sailing right for him. He lifts the sword he just grabbed to block it, falling backwards and trying frantically to make it back to his feet.

Chaos immediately unleashes all at once. An arrow goes flying, but Regulus manages to dodge it in the midst of launching himself right at Mulciber. Bernice is downright *ruthless* with her sword, swinging at James again and again so quickly that he can only block over and over to keep his head from being sliced cleanly from his body.

Axus swings their hook in the air like a lasso, and James *sees* it go right for Regulus, and—it doesn't miss. It hooks into the same spot as before, but Regulus doesn't even slow down. He just grabs the rope part and *yanks* so hard that Axus stumbles to the ground, cursing under their breath as the rope slips through their hands rapidly enough that it likely burns. Regulus rips the hook right out and throws it carelessly to the side, making it disappear through the trees. Axus curses vibrantly and darts off to go get it.

Quinn rushes after Regulus with her spear, and James manages to knock back Bernice's sword with enough force to get the time to make it to his feet. Hodge is there, so small with his knife raised. He doesn't move, so James doesn't either. The three of them—James, Bernice, and Hodge—proceed to have a silent stand-off, their weapons at the ready.

James' heart thumps loudly in his ears, and his mind is racing. He's distracted worrying about Regulus, even though Mulciber has no weapon. Quinn is over there, though, and she has her spear. Regulus has a hatchet, at least, but Mulciber still has his fists. Also, James is *not* some god with a sword. He barely knows how to hold the fucking thing, and it's a lot heavier than he was expecting it to be. Bernice holds hers like she knows how to use it, which is concerning.

A sudden blood-curdling scream makes them all freeze before snapping their heads over

instinctively to follow the sound. Mulciber is on the ground, and Regulus is ripping the hatchet out of his arm, then bringing it right back down.

"Pieces! I fucking *told you* you'd be in pieces!" Regulus roars, and he swings back down, stomping on Mulciber's hand until he breaks all the way through. The sound of it is sickening, and the blood —there's so much blood. Regulus snatches the hatchet up yet again, then *kicks* Mulciber's hand away from where it was separated from his body.

"Oh, fuck," Bernice chokes out, sounding like she might vomit, and honestly? James knows the feeling.

Mulciber screams and writhes on the ground, frantically clawing at his own arm, and Regulus just looks down at him like he's a twitching bug that can't get up off its back. He raises the hatchet again, looking to be going for the head this time, and he's so focused that he doesn't see Quinn behind him. She draws back her spear.

"Regulus!" James shouts, and the name rips out of him in nothing short of pure fucking terror.

~•~

The spear catches Regulus along his side, just a bit above his hip, and it glances off as he stumbles away from it with a loud curse. Two inches to the left, and the spearhead would have been *in* him. Maybe his luck is turning up after all.

Maybe not, though, because Quinn just starts to lunge for him again, and he's not steady enough to fully block this time. It's going to land right in the center of his stomach, and again, James yells. Regulus sucks in a sharp breath, his ears ringing, and then a vine shaped into a noose drops down over Quinn's head and snaps tight around her throat.

Quinn proceeds to get lifted clear off her feet, raising in the air and dropping her spear as she scrambles at her throat and chokes, kicking in the air. As she goes up, Evan comes down, the end of the vine in his hands. It's like a pully system over the branch he falls from, him sinking down artfully as she thrashes her way higher. He wastes no time in rushing to the tree to tie the vine around the trunk, securing it there so Quinn won't fall back down.

On the ground, Mulciber is weeping.

"Fuck! Fuck, Hodge, we need to cut her down!" Bernice bellows. "Willa? Willa, where the fuck *are* you?!"

"Run!" Evan shouts at Regulus.

"James!" Regulus shouts back, like an answer, and then they're both running right for James, who is currently trying to throw Willa off his back. She has no more arrows, so now she's resorted to attempting to strangle him with her arms.

Mulciber is still flailing on the ground, Quinn is still flailing in the air, and Bernice and Hodge have abandoned James in favor of getting her down. Axus is still trying to find their hook, probably, and now Regulus is grateful that he threw it.

James does manage to throw Willa off of him, fully just shaking her off because she's so small compared to him. He stumbles back, sword still in hand, and he could kill her. He could, easily, but he doesn't. He sees Regulus and Evan racing right for him, and he starts backing up to meet them at a full sprint as they start crashing through the woods.

Run.

Run.

Run.

And so, they're running again.

This time, no one is chasing them, and now they have a third person with them, someone that Regulus—at this point—is sure he trusts. No one is following, and they still run like their lives are at stake. They can't be convinced that they aren't.

No cannon sounds, not even when they've been running for so long that Quinn would definitely be dead by now, which means that they managed to cut her down. Mulciber—well, he can survive without a hand, so long as he doesn't bleed out. Regulus isn't too happy about it, honestly. He didn't chop off Mulciber's hand out of *mercy.* He was going to kill him.

Regulus *still* wants to kill him. The murderous rage is still pumping through him, not letting up. Later, maybe he'll be sickened by how he just lost it, but for *now,* he remains fucking *furious.*

"Regulus. *Regulus,* stop," James wheezes, and he starts slowing, which makes Evan and Regulus do the same.

Slowly, they all come to a stop, breathing hard. As soon as Regulus gets still, his injuries make themselves known, and he groans as he cups his side and bends over slightly, eyes squeezing shut as he tries to catch his breath. Nothing is fatal, he knows that, but it still fucking *hurts.* The threat of infection is a concern as well, so stopping to dress their wounds is a must. But not here, not out in the open.

"Shit," Regulus gasps out, forcing himself to straighten up. He blinks at Evan in a daze, and Evan gives him a weak grin, also catching his breath. "Evan, what the fuck?"

"No one ever thinks to look up, eh, lover boy?" Evan says with a breathy chuckle.

Regulus stares at him, then busts out laughing. He isn't sure where it comes from, but he just—laughs. A full-bellied laugh that actually hurts him a bit, so it doesn't last long. Shit, his body hurts. He can feel the rush of adrenaline seeping out of him, letting in the exhaustion that makes him tremble.

"You're hurt," James mumbles, stumbling over towards him with wide eyes. His face is still bleeding.

"Yeah, no shit, James," Regulus replies with a grimace as he peels up his jacket and shirt to look at his side.

James hisses between his teeth. "Oh, that's—"

"It's not fatal," Regulus cuts in. "I'll live."

"Not if we don't clean it," James retorts. "Reg, we need to get you cleaned up as soon as possible. Infection might—"

Regulus eases his shirt and coat down. "Yeah, alright, but not here. We can't stay out in the open like this."

"Do you really think the death eaters are going to chase us down after all of *that?"* Evan asks incredulously.

"Of course they are. As soon as they get Mulciber's arm wrapped, they'll be on their way," Regulus mutters as he reaches out and grabs James' chin, turning his head so he can narrow his eyes at the cut on his cheek. There's a smaller one on his throat, too, but it's already stopped bleeding. The one on his face is slowing down, at least. "They have supplies with them, so it won't take long to recover. Mulciber will be on a warpath, no doubt. James, stop moving."

"I'm *fine,"* James insists, trying to lean his head back.

"Let me *look* at it, you idiot."

"I said I'm fine. *You're* worse off. Let me see your shoulder—"

Evan clears his throat. "If you two are done, there's a stream not too far from here with a little cave close by. Feel free to stop flirting at any time."

"Piss off," Regulus grumbles, but he dutifully drops his hand and turns towards Evan. "I saw Axus got their hook. Do you still have your knife?"

"Willa and Axus chased me for a long time," Evan says wearily, heaving a sigh. "Willa stole my knife; she's a crafty girl, I hate to admit. I managed to shake Axus by assuming they'd chase the hook if I tossed it, and I was right. I still have my supplies, obviously." He reaches up to pat the strap of his bag. "I just don't have any weapons. Didn't let that stop me, though."

"Here," Regulus says, holding out the hatchet to James, who stares at it without moving. His eyes crawl up to meet Regulus' gaze, and he swallows thickly. Regulus nods at him, which makes him take the hatchet slowly and carefully. It's covered in Mulciber's blood. Regulus takes the sword; James doesn't protest, just letting him have it. He holds it out to Evan, who blinks at it. "Here."

Evan only waits one moment before he reaches out to take it, then he mumbles, "Thanks."

"Lead the way," Regulus replies, sweeping out his hand.

"The death eaters know the stream, but not the cave," Evan explains as he turns and starts walking. "I've seen them go to the stream from the trees, but I don't think they've realized there's a cave near it. Should be safe for a few moments."

"Unless they've already recovered enough to start searching for us again," James points out.

"Yes, so maybe pick up the pace, yeah?" Evan suggests, and they all start up a light jog, which is about all they can manage with how sore and exhausted they all are.

Regulus presses his hand to his side with a wince, but he keeps going past the pain. "Did your supplies come with anything even vaguely medical?"

"No, but I have a cloth that should help clean you two up, and a bowl we can carry water in," Evan replies.

"Lovely," Regulus mutters with a sigh. "Not that I'm not grateful, Evan, but what were you doing in that tree?"

"I heard Mulciber scream," Evan says, and Regulus keeps staring straight ahead as James and Evan both glance at him from either side. "I wasn't too far, actually, and I was...curious, so I got close and climbed up to see what was going on. A right fright you were while chopping away, lover boy."

"Yes, well, you missed the part where I warned him that would happen," Regulus says. "Not my fault he didn't listen."

Evan whistles low, then clicks his tongue. "Can't imagine what he did to make you give a warning like that. I can guess, though. Threaten your boyfriend?"

"Mocked his brother, actually," James corrects.

Both, Regulus thinks, then grimaces as soon as he's had the thought, because James *isn't* his boyfriend. Regulus is just—look, he's injured and tired and dealing with a lot, okay? Give him a break. He can't be blamed for the thoughts he has under these circumstances, especially when he's essentially being guided into them because he knows that Evan means James when he says *your boyfriend.* Fuck, Regulus needs a nap.

They're all quiet until they locate the stream Evan is taking them to. He points out the cave, but they stop by the water first. It's clear and clean, less of a stream and more of a pond. The water is startlingly still outside of a few ripples that come from the wind and nothing else. Regulus can see all the way through to the bottom, and there's not one fish or anything else inside it.

Evan goes further down away from them to gather water in his canister and bowl, while James and Regulus crouch down to clean the blood off their hands for the second time today. It's getting a little bit later, but not late enough that the death eaters will retreat for the night. There's still time.

Regulus can feel James looking at him. He's not brave enough to look back, because now his anger is down to a simmer, just quietly festering under the surface. He has the space for shame and discomfort for his own actions, at this point. He doesn't know *how* James will be looking at him.

Vaguely, Regulus wonders what Sirius must have thought, seeing him chop off Mulciber's hand. That's a bit stupid, isn't it? Sirius did things in his games, too. Horrible things. He vividly remembers being fifteen and watching Sirius bite someone's finger off before spitting it out, using the advantage of their agony to finish them off. He was *ruthless,* unafraid to do anything and everything—even grotesque things—to stay alive. The worst part is, he never would have done those things at all if no one had tried to kill him in the first place.

If Mulciber hadn't cut James' cheek and made him flinch, then maybe he would still have his hand.

Regulus thinks Sirius wouldn't blame him, or see him any differently. Strangely, Regulus doesn't *feel* any different, but he's rational enough to work out why. Mulciber isn't dead. Yes, he's missing his hand, but Regulus didn't *kill* him.

He still wants to, though. Just because his anger has settled down doesn't mean it went away. It's still there, mostly just resting at the moment.

It's going to weigh on him. He knows it will. Already, he can see the blur of blood without even closing his eyes and hear Mulciber's shrieks of pain ringing in his ears even after they've stopped. Regulus will deal with it in his nightmares.

"Regulus," James says.

"I'm fine," Regulus replies reflexively.

"Regulus, look at me," James orders firmly, and there's something authoritative about his tone that Regulus responds to immediately. He looks, and James meets his gaze steadily, his expression calm. "You're not fine."

"I can't afford to let that matter," Regulus admits, because no, he's not fine. James is not fine. *No one* in this damn arena is *fine.* It's not possible, and they all have to carry on anyway. It's not a choice. "Just leave it, James."

"I don't—blame you," James murmurs.

"No?" Regulus raises his eyebrows. "I just mutilated someone. Tell me, how exactly are you going to excuse that?"

James shakes his head. "I'm not excusing it. I'm looking at it logically, and don't make a snarky fucking comment about me not having any logic, Regulus. I'm not in the mood, and this isn't a joke. We are in an arena where we have no *choice* but to fight and kill to survive. I buried my hatchet in a man's skull less than three hours ago."

"That was different."

"How?"

"I didn't have to chop off Mulciber's hand to survive, James. I did that because I—" Regulus cuts himself off and looks away.

"Because you were angry, and scared, and *fighting* under intense circumstances where dying was so much of a risk that everything—all of it—was survival instincts," James insists, swaying forward to catch Regulus' gaze again. "I know it came from a place of anger, but murder isn't delicate, Regulus. It's not clean. Sometimes it's brutal, like *that,* like the things Sirius had to do when it was him. You don't think I haven't had this same conversation with him before, hm?"

Regulus swallows, then reaches out to gently take the hatchet from James, dipping that in the water. It's his mess, after all; he should clean it up. "I know that, here in the arena, the perimeters for what must be done to survive are different than out there, but James...I don't want to get lost in that."

"Regulus," James whispers, and his hand comes down to cover his wrist, his eyes soft and sad.

"Can't you feel it?" Regulus whispers back, searching his eyes, desperate to find understanding. "It's like this—this *pit.* Like we're being pushed and pushed until we're frayed. Ragged and hungry like animals. But we feel—we *feel,* James, and not the way animals do. Deeper. Stronger. With higher intelligence, usually. So, our rage, our pain, our fear—it can become a weapon. And this arena, it's just this pit we fall further into until everything else, all the rules and—and what's *right,* just gets farther and farther out of reach. This place sucks the humanity right out of us. Can't you feel it?"

James takes a deep breath, then slowly exhales and nods. He looks pained. "That's why I didn't want to kill the animals. I actually—I wasn't as against it at the start, but then I saw them, and I thought… I don't know. The feeling of—of *having* to kill them was like this...vice around my throat. I didn't want to have to, just like I didn't want to have to kill that man, but I did. I can feel it, Regulus. You're not alone."

"I don't want to lose myself," Regulus rasps, "and I'm—I'm scared that I already have."

"You're so like Sirius sometimes," James murmurs tenderly, with a smile that's tinged with a mixture of fondness and pain. "I'm scared, too, but we're still here and we're still trying."

Regulus huffs a weak laugh. "That has to count for something, doesn't it? Is that what you're saying?"

"Almost. I think it counts for a lot of things," James replies, his smile growing warmer. His hand slips down into the water so he can squeeze Regulus' fingers between his own. "We're okay. We'll be okay, love."

"For now," Regulus says softly.

He looks away and pulls his hand free from James' grip, because his touch, even under the water,

puts that stupid flutter in Regulus' chest. It's senseless. This is the worst possible place to go about having fucking *heart flutters* because James Potter has touched him, like he's suddenly fourteen again. For fuck's sake, he needs to get a grip. He's *literally* in a life or death situation at all times.

Regulus finishes cleaning off James' hatchet, then gives it back to him. Their hands are clean, but there's still blood on them from their wounds, and also on their clothes. That will just have to dry into it, because it's not as if they can wash their clothes at the moment. It's getting too late, and none of it will be dry by the time the temperature drops. So, for tonight, they'll be sleeping in clothes stiff with blood.

Evan approaches with the bowl and cloth, holding them up with a smug little smile. The prick is unharmed, of course, so he's completely free of what's surely about to be an irritating process. It's likely going to hurt, but it's necessary.

"Alright, let's get into the cave in case our friends head in this direction," Evan declares, nodding for James to walk ahead of him while Regulus grabs his bag.

"They won't be able to find us if they do, right?" James checks, turning around to walk backwards and face them both.

"The cave is behind loads of shrubbery and vines, so it's barely even visible to the eye. I actually only found it because I was avoiding Axus and Willa. Practically fell in," Evan assures him with a chuckle. "So long as we're quiet, they'll come through and never even know we were here."

There's a distinct click of a mechanism releasing, and then James is howling at the top of his lungs and crumbling to the ground. His scream of pain echoes off the trees, so loud that birds take flight, and Regulus can't even blame him.

James just got himself caught in a bear trap.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you coming to the end notes for the more in-depth warnings:

the explicit depictions of murder:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP, THEN STOP READING WHEN IT SWITCHES TO REGULUS' POV AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT SWAPS TO JAMES' SECOND

POV.

if you just want the in-depth warning: regulus is attacked without warning by—as of now—an unnamed man, pinned to the ground and nearly stabbed. james swings his hatchet into the man's head, killing him. it's described in a bit of detail, but only briefly. there's descriptions of blood.

As for the explicit depictions of violence:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP IT, STOP READING AFTER REGULUS' SECOND POV WHEN MULCIBER GRABS JAMES AND PUTS A SWORD TO HIS THROAT AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT'S REGULUS' THIRD POV AND THEY'RE RUNNING AGAIN

if you just want the in-depth warning: regulus and james get into a fight with the death eaters. mulciber slices james' face with his sword. regulus cuts mulciber's hand off with the hatchet—and this is described in a bit of detail, mentions of blood and regulus stomping on his hand. regulus is sliced on the side by quinn with her spear. evan also shows up, and he does so by dropping a noose made out of vine around quinn's throat, falling from the tree as she gets raised in the air. both mulciber and quinn survive these things.

for those of you who have finished the chapter...

whew, what a doozy, huh?

let's get into it, i guess.

once again, i led you all in with a false sense of security. i do have a terrible habit of doing that. i would apologize, but i fear i will do it again. whoops

it started out so nice, right? like, james was chilling, flirting with regulus—ya know, as one does—talking about cute little memories and stuff. the rock story 😭😭😭 pls, im such a whore for the idea of regulus being a sweet, shy kid (to people he likes, at least) who ends up growing into this mean prick of an adult. also, regulus and james talking about the Parting Gift. it was bound to happen eventually, but they couldn't have picked a worse time.

then BOOM. murder james' first kill. that was so sad. he looked hot while doing it, though, so... ♂

NO LET ME STOP 😭 that was a joke. i have to deflect with humor, or ill genuinely get very sad, because james is sad about it, and i LOVE HIM. yes, i know i wrote it. i still have the right to want to hug him anyway. that's okay, because i made regulus coddle him afterwards, AS HE SHOULD. james literally just killed for him, you're damn right regulus coddled him.

unfortunately, things just Got Worse. james didn't even get to properly deal with anything before his life (and Regulus') was in danger AGAIN. that whole running scene was such a rush to write, i hope you all know that. i had run boy run by woodkid playing and it was genuinely so thrilling. that makes me sound like a bad person, maybe, but i mean from a writer's standpoint, mostly, because i was In The Zone while writing it. you haven't LIVED until you're writing something and you look up to realize you haven't moved in 3 hours.

anyway, regulus being a menace seems to be a running theme in my fics. like, i always give him at least one Unhinged Moment where we're all like: oh, he is Very Unwell. he actually has more than one in this fic, but that's besides the point. this first one was chopping mulciber's hand off and then feeling exactly zero remorse for it. in his defense, he LITERALLY told mulciber what would happen if he made james flinch. like, you cant say he didn't warn him. he's just a man who keeps his promises, if you think about it. and also, mulciber insulted sirius, too. i will defend regulus with my life, okay?

then EVAN!!! OUR BOY IS BACK!!! evan, my beloved <3 he really just swooped in and saved the day. king behavior. i am swooning.

(side note: regulus thinking of james as his boyfriend by accident, then immediately dismissing it. my brother in christ, you are fooling NO ONE)

finally, The Bear Trap. heh, who put that there anyway? those damn gamemakers, just a bunch of assholes, am i right? 😄 poor james... you're not gonna believe me, but i really do love him so much.

yeah, listen, you can yell at me, that's fine, i have accepted the consequences of my choices. that was mean to leave on a cliffhanger, wasn't it? again, i would apologize, but...well. it will unfortunately happen again, and anyway, it's not that long of a wait!

alright, let's do numbers:

remaining tributes as of this chapter: 14
tributes that have died, as of this chapter: dylan, avery, and eight unnamed/unknown others.

UPDATING ON SATURDAY

Loss

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-graphic depictions of violence
-graphic depictions of injuries
-descriptions of blood
-murder/death
-depictions of grief
-angst

(i will, as always, be putting a little spoiler-y in-depth warning in the end notes for those of you who want/need it, which is valid!)

this is another heavy one, unfortunately. it has its light moments, but overall, it's sad as shit. so, i recommend reading with something to cuddle close by! also, maybe read where you can cry without anyone seeing you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There's the sound of Evan's bowl hitting the ground, and then the first thing James feels outside of the searing, white-hot agony centered on his leg is hands on his face.

Regulus has thrown himself down on the ground next to him, his face alarmingly pale. He's cradling James' cheeks, but only for a second, and then he's ripping himself away to go to the trap on James' leg. James stares down at it as he gasps out choked noises of pain, whimpering and biting his lip so hard that he nearly bites clean through. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck.*

It hurts so fucking bad. James has never—he hasn't felt pain like this before. He's never even broken a bone, so seeing the trap clamped down on his leg is just—so much. It is *so much,* and James' head reels from how much *pain* there is. And to think, there are worse things to experience, and greater pains to feel. James can't even fathom it, any of it. He thinks the entire concept of pain is just stupid. It shouldn't exist.

"We—we have to pry it open," Regulus says, his voice sounding strained. James can see his hands shaking. "Evan—"

"I know. I just." Evan exhales and grimaces. *"Fuck.* Okay, James, this is going to hurt, like, *really* bad. As soon as we get it open, you need to move your leg free. Regulus, you get one side, and I'll

pull the other. Firm grip now. *Regulus."*

At the sharp call of his name, Regulus gives a violent blink and jolts into motion. He nods at Evan, and they both reach out to carefully grip the sides of the trap. Neither of them pull.

"Just—fuck, just do it," James grits out. He can*feel* the teeth of the trap buried in his leg, deep enough to scrape bone.

"Together," Regulus rasps. "One, two, th—"

"Wait," Evan blurts out. "On three, or after three?"

"Evan!" Regulus shouts, glaring at him and looking frazzled.

Evan huffs. "It's a valid question!"

"Three!" Regulus bellows, and they immediately start pulling at the same time, which is when James starts screaming bloody murder again.

It almost hurts *more* being pried open than when it clamped shut, honestly. James' leg immediately starts throbbing harder, wave after wave of pain radiating from his leg all through his body. As soon as he has room, James lifts his leg free and scoots himself back, his shouts tapering off into whimpers as his foot drags along the ground.

When Evan and Regulus let go of the trap, it snaps shut with a clang, blood staining the teeth where it meets. In seconds, Regulus is back at James' side, hands cradling his cheeks once more. James looks at him, blinking tears out of his eyes.

"You're fine," Regulus says breathlessly, his eyes wide, and he's still so pale. "It's fine. You're fine, James. It's not even that bad, yeah? Don't be a baby about it."

"It fucking *hurts,"* James confesses, nearly whining.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry. You're fine, baby. It's fine," Regulus rambles, his fingers trembling as they pat down the sides of his neck, more unsteady now than he was in the aftermath of cutting Mulciber's hand off.

"Regulus, you need to get him up, *now,"* Evan hisses. "There's no way the death eaters didn't hear that. I wouldn't be fucking surprised if *everyone* heard that. Get him to the cave. *Go."*

"I—I don't think I'll be able to walk," James chokes out, his panic rising until he almost can't breathe around it. Not being able to walk out here, in *these* conditions, that's a fucking death sentence. He immediately starts spiraling.

"I'll help you. It's fine, I'll help. Shh, you're okay, I'm going to help," Regulus chants, and then he's shifting forward to get an arm around James, helping haul him up.

It's not a graceful process. The difference in the position changes the feeling of pain, somehow, which doesn't even *make sense.* Maybe it's the gravity that tugs at his leg once he's upright, or maybe it's the bolts of searing pain that shoot up his leg when he nearly stumbles and puts even a *hint* of weight on his foot, or maybe it's the drag of cloth against his wounds as it shifts on his skin. Whatever it is, it has him clamping down on Regulus and clenching his teeth so he won't yell.

Sweat drips down James' forehead, and Regulus tucks himself into his side, an arm around him. He supports most of James' weight and begins helping him limp towards the direction of the cave. It's slow-going, honestly, but they make some progress before Evan catches up with them, having refilled the bowl of water and gathered his things again.

As soon as Evan reaches them, he ducks under James' other arm without a word and helps support him along the way, as much as he can while holding so many things at once.

Getting to the cave is difficult; getting *inside* is a fucking trial and a half. It's a little bit elevated, and it's behind a wall of vines and shrubbery, like Evan said. Evan has to dart inside to put everything down, then come back and peel open a gap big enough for them to fit through. It doesn't work really well, so James and Regulus stumble inside, which makes James step down with his bad leg, and *that* rips a whimper from his lips.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *fuck,* I'm so sorry," Regulus apologizes, and he sounds absolutely fretful, so much despair in his voice that it actually breaks James' heart a little bit.

"It's—it's okay," James wheezes, doing his best to pretend he's not in as much pain as he's actually in. Putting on a brave face. Trying to soothe Regulus more than himself, at this point.

Regulus helps him over to the cave wall next to where Evan sat his things, slowly easing him down with care. James holds his breath until he's settled, his legs stretched out in front of him, and then he exhales explosively and tips his head back, eyes drifting shut for a moment. Just from that small walk to the cave, he feels like he's about to pass out.

"We need to look at it," Evan mumbles, and James opens his eyes to see him kneeling by his leg. He looks up and makes a face at James. "This…is also going to hurt. Sorry."

"Just give him a fucking minute to *breathe,"* Regulus snaps.

"Listen, I get that you're fretting right now, lover boy, but we don't have *time* to do this gently," Evan replies. "We need to see how bad it is, and so does your *mentor,* because James may need medicine we don't have."

"All I've got is a tiny bottle of antiseptic and a few bandages," Regulus admits, pulling his bag off to dig for it.

"Wait, what about you?" James asks. "You're hurt. You—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus cuts in distractedly, not even paying him any mind as he pulls out the compact kit. He pops it open to reveal a depressingly small bottle and three bandages that are also very tiny. He holds it up towards Evan almost desperately.

"Let's just see how bad it is first," Evan mutters, eyeing the kit with a grimace, like it's pathetic. "Alright, James, ready?"

James blows out a deep breath. "No. Do it anyway."

Evan does it anyway. In his defense, he does try to be gentle when he slowly, carefully starts rolling up the clothes over James' leg. It's just that every shift and tug causes fire to lick up and down his nerve-endings in the worst way possible. He tenses up and grits his teeth, squeezing Regulus' hand so hard that he's going to feel bad about it later.

But Regulus is right there, leaning in to murmur nonsense in his ear, just a steady stream of, "You're fine. It's fine. I know it hurts, I'm sorry. Just breathe, James. It's fine. Shh."

"You—you called me 'baby' before, you know," James gasps out, his chest heaving as he rolls his head to the side to gaze at Regulus, more than willing to do everything in his power to avoid what's going on down at his leg.

"No, I didn't," Regulus denies instantly. "I told you not to *be* a baby about this, and you're failing miserably."

James flinches when cloth drags over where the teeth of the trap bit into his leg, and Regulus immediately backtracks.

"Sorry, no, you're doing great," Regulus blurts out, his voice pitched higher with distress, and now he's squeezing James' hand back almost as hard.

"Right, but—ah, *fuck."* James grimaces and struggles not to shift, not to try to squirm away from the pain. He gives his head a literal shake, like he can just…shake it off. It doesn't work, but he focuses on Regulus anyway. "But yeah, you said that, and *then* you called me 'baby'. Like, you know, tenderly."

"Tenderly?" Regulus repeats, bewildered.

"A pet name. Term of endearment. Whatever you wish to call it," James explains. "You said it."

"You did," Evan confirms.

"You stay out of this," Regulus says warningly, then glances back at James. "I did not call you *baby* as a term of endearment or a pet name, though it would be very fitting, because you're absolutely being a baby about this right now."

"But you did, though," James insists. "Do it again."

"James."

"I could *die.* You don't know."

"You're not going to die," Regulus snaps. "Shut up."

Evan snorts, drawing their attention. "No, James, sadly you don't get to use the *dying* card, I'm afraid. Not yet, at least. It's…bad, yes, and you *definitely* need medicine, but it would take days to kill you."

"How bad? Let me see." Regulus pulls away to go examine James' leg, and all the color that had returned to his face proceeds to drain right back out.

"Not good?" James asks weakly, but he doesn't need to ask. He can see it from here. The wounds are deep, *very* deep, and they're still sluggishly pouring blood. The skin is angry red and swollen, inflamed already.

Regulus swallows, then clears his throat. "This is—fine. Evan, give me some water. James, hold still."

Evan passes him the bowl and cloth, and Regulus dips the cloth before giving James a warning look, waiting to receive a nod before he squeezes out the cloth over James' leg. The water cascades down, washing away blood and dirt, and it's terribly cold. James raises his arm and bites down into the side of his coat, pounding his free hand against the floor.

Gently, Regulus cleans his leg as much as he can, eventually using the cloth to carefully wipe around the entry wounds. He goes for the antiseptic next, using every drop and ignoring James when he tries to protest. Evan chuckles when James complains, but he doesn't intervene, just letting Regulus do whatever he likes. James, of course, fusses.

"At least keep *one* bandage for yourself," James demands, utterly aghast when Regulus starts peeling them open. "You have that gash on your side. Regulus, *please* just—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus says dismissively, yet again, then carefully covers James' wounds in every single bandage, somehow managing to make them all fit.

"You're not going to be able to walk," Evan informs him. "Not for a few days, at least. Not unless you get medicine sent in by your mentor."

"Which is going to happen," Regulus says, then tips his head back to glare directly at the ceiling of the cave. "Sirius, you're going send something to *fix him,* or so help me, when I get out of here, I'm going to rip all of your hair out right from the scalp until you're fucking *bald."*

There's a long beat of silence, and James blinks at Regulus, startled. Regulus is very…agitated. Fussy. Frantic, almost. He's clearly on edge, like maybe he doesn't like to see James in pain, and James thinks he *doesn't.* It puts a soft glow of warmth in James' chest to realize that Regulus is *concerned* about him.

James thinks that realization alone could cure him, because despite the pain all over, he breaks out into a grin and feels like he could hop up and run around. He doesn't test the theory, but he feels it nonetheless.

"His *hair,* Reg? That's a bit much, isn't it?" James teases.

"It's just enough for him to know I am *not* joking," Regulus grumbles, then huffs and dips the cloth in the bowl, wringing it out. He shifts to come back to James' side, freezing when he looks at James' face. "What are you grinning about?"

"You're upset because I'm *hurt,"* James whispers, beaming at him. Regulus presses his lips into a thin line, but doesn't deny it or confirm it. "Also, you called me 'baby'."

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Fuck off, I did *not."*

"Did too," James says. "Evan heard it."

"Evan did hear it," Evan agrees. "You said it, lover boy. Might as well own it."

"I like you," James declares cheerfully, and Evan winks at him.

"Shut up, both of you," Regulus says, shaking his head as he settles on his knees next to James and lifts the cloth to start cleaning the blood off his cheek. He's very gentle about it.

James holds still and flicks his gaze over Regulus' face. He has a bruise at the high point of his cheek, but the cut there is scabbed over and healing now. The split lip isn't swollen anymore, and it's also visibly better than it was the day prior. Something about *seeing* him get better soothes James, like a reassurance that everything that happens here is something that will one day fade. James knows better than that, through Sirius and even his mum, but he still finds it within him to have that hope anyway. One day, Regulus will heal.

The thing about healing that no one talks about is, it's painful. Getting better *hurts.* It's not something that's just easily done and over with. Bruises have to ache before they fade, and cuts have to bleed before they scab, and breaks have to set before they mend. Sometimes, healing is harder than being hurt.

Regulus carefully drags the cloth around James' slice on his cheek, eyebrows furrowed as he looks at it. He seems displeased about it, even more than James is. He knows it's not fatal, so he's not too worried about it, honestly. Sure, it hurts, but not very bad and it's *nothing* compared to his leg.

"It's fine," James murmurs.

"It might scar," Regulus shoots back, sounding unhappy.

James raises his eyebrows. "Have a problem with scars, do you?"

"No," Regulus says. "Scars themselves aren't a problem, but he had no right—he only did that because I—" He stops and shakes his head, looking and sounding very frustrated. Even still, he remains gentle when cleaning James' neck. "I should have put the hatchet between his eyes for this."

"You know, I've noticed that you get really offended about things involving my appearance," James muses. "You were upset about my glasses, the idea of my hair getting cut, and now this. What's that all about, Reg?"

Regulus frowns, and he doesn't speak for a long time, not until he pulls the cloth back. James can feel his damp skin prickling in the soft breeze that flows into the cave. He watches Regulus exhale deeply and reach up with his free hand to carefully brush the tips of his fingers under the cut on

James' cheek, his touch so light that it doesn't even hurt.

Regulus swallows. "I don't want them to change you."

James feels the impact of those words in his chest, because he instantly understands what Regulus means. He's somehow found the words for it, so succinct to explain something with such depths, and James is pretty sure his heart fucking *breaks.*

The thing is, it's more than just *change,* especially surface-level changes. Regulus—like Sirius—doesn't handle change well. When they're settled into something, comfortable with how the world is when it makes sense to them, any difference that comes in to shake that up will upset them. James thinks it's a result of their childhood, the constant abuse from their parents, never having a sense of stability because every day was a different battle they couldn't prepare themselves for. So, the things that *give* them a sense of stability—they cling to them, and if that changes, it's more upsetting than anything.

It's not about how James *looks,* not really. It's more of a representation for the stability he offers just as himself, because through everything, he's remained a constant. Sirius and Regulus were changed when Sirius volunteered. Forever altered with barely any resemblance to who they were before it happened. James changed, too, but in little ways. Quieter ways. Hidden ways, safely tucked behind closed doors where Sirius and Regulus could not see. He didn't lose too much of himself for it to become obvious the way they did, and he's just now realizing that—like Sirius—Regulus takes comfort from that. He's *protective* of that. Defensive of it, just the same as Sirius.

I don't want them to change you, Regulus said. It's more than just taking his glasses and giving him scars. It's a plea for James to get through this unscathed. Because he was always the one with a bridge to who they all used to be. He's closest to it, like a connection they can reach out and touch, a reminder of what they lost when they're in danger of forgetting that there used to be anything at all.

James thinks that Sirius and Regulus have many different fears, and one that they share is how easily the Hallow and the games can alter everything. The fact that they want to protect James from that, both of them, is…heartbreaking. Because they can't. Because there's absolutely nothing they can do to save him from it, and he would know, because he tried everything in his power to save *them.*

He failed. He failed them both.

Taking a deep breath, James reaches up and gently sweeps Regulus' hair back over his temple,

tucking some of it behind his ear, staring right into his eyes as he whispers, "They already have, love."

It's spoken in a tone that is weighted with remorse and regret, because he's not happy about it either, but he won't lie. The moment he killed that man, that was it. There's more, too. The fear, the desperation, the repeated surge of the *need* to survive; it all molds him every second, his shape ever-changing.

James doesn't have the heart to tell him that it's been like this for years. Even before he killed a man. Even before he entered the arena. Even before his name was called. Ten years ago, he was changed, too, just from the sound of Regulus' name and Sirius walking to the stage in his place.

"No," Regulus denies quietly, his voice a mere breath, and he looks like he's just been slapped. He shakes his head minutely, his eyes wide and a little wet, almost like he's betrayed by this.

He sounds so *innocent.* So young. Twenty-five and James can hear the fifteen year old in him, on the verge of breaking, like this is the most devastating thing to happen to him since he watched his brother take his place in the arena. It's like he's trembling on the inside, like that scared boy is trembling within him. Still trembling. Always trembling.

"Yes," James tells him gently, but he knows something that they don't, something that they struggle with when he doesn't, and never has. "It's okay, though. Do you want to know why? They can mold me, shape me, but what I'm made of, what I *am;* that doesn't change. Who we are—that's ours, Regulus. No one can take that from us. If nothing else, we always have that."

"I don't want them to *touch* you," Regulus snaps, and now he sounds almost—petulant. Frustrated. Indignant. He shakes his head and then, without warning, folds forward to press his face into James' shoulder, leaning into him.

This is. Well. This is a bit different, in that Regulus now sounds quite bitchy, and also wildly possessive, which is. Yeah. Yeah, that's something. Confusing, mostly, but *something.*

Regulus, in his greatest moments of emotion, has always done one of two things. He either shuts down and shuts it out until he can figure out how to properly ignore it, or he rides it out until he can wrangle it under control, usually while hiding. In the arena, James has noticed that Regulus doesn't let himself shut down, almost like he's afraid of it. Feeling is a connection to one's humanity, and when you're in an environment that's trying to wring that out of you, *not* letting yourself feel will only help it in the long-run. So, even in just riding his feelings out, Regulus is being a rebellious little shit, basically.

James is admittedly confused about the nature of Regulus' feelings at the moment, about *him,* but he's aware that they're important. He can make some of them out, and he knows what they mean. Possessive, protective, concerned, gentle—all of it curls up in James' chest like a purring cat, because he *knows* it means something. It has to.

James wants to ask. *Do you still hate me? You said you always would, but are you sure that's true?* He can't bring himself to say the words, because he's in enough pain as it is, and right now, he's not willing to risk more.

So, instead, he lifts his hand and cups the back of Regulus' head, carding his fingers through his hair and never feeling as powerful as he does when tension seeps out of Regulus' body with each swipe. James smiles fondly at the top of his head.

"Sorry to break this up," Evan says, and all of the tension slams back into Regulus' body immediately as he pulls away with a sharp inhale. James shoots a glare at Evan, who is standing by the entrance to the cave. James wasn't even aware that he wandered away to give them some privacy, but he's suddenly ending that kindness as he swivels to come rushing back over to them, eyes wide. "We have a problem."

Regulus heaves a sigh. "Don't we always?"

~•~

The *problem,* as it turns out, is the distant sound of the death eaters getting closer. Regulus stands at the entrance of the cave, his heart racing as he *hears* them approaching. They're going to make it here soon.

"You said they don't know the cave?" Regulus asks, keeping his voice low so James can't hear. They're both being very quiet, not wanting to alert James to the current issue.

"They don't," Evan confirms warily, "but that doesn't mean they can't find it if they're determined enough. We need to move, Regulus. *Now."*

"We can't," Regulus grits out. He glances over his shoulder at James, then looks away. *"He* can't."

Evan grimaces. "If they discover him, he won't be able to run on that leg, or even…fight, really."

"Maybe they'll keep going," Regulus murmurs.

"Regulus…" Evan looks at him with a strain around his eyes. He slowly shakes his head. "This is where the screams came from, and it's a source of water. They're going to check around *thoroughly* before they continue on."

Regulus clenches his jaw, flexing his fingers down by his side as his mind races. The thing is, he *knows* Evan is right. It's what he would do if he was hunting people down to kill them. A part of him is unnerved by how easy it is to put himself in their shoes. The mind of a murderer—he has it. Sirius does, too. Regulus has known that since he was fifteen.

James doesn't. Hopefully, he never will.

"Alright," Regulus says softly, taking a deep breath. "Well, if not letting them get here is the goal, I suppose the only option is to lead them away."

"Oh, you're *mental,* lover boy," Evan breathes out, eyes wide.

Regulus ignores him and whips around to move over to James, dropping down next to him. James looks startled as Regulus pushes the hatchet into his hands, forcefully wrapping his fingers around the handle.

"Regulus?" James mumbles.

"I need to step out for a bit," Regulus says calmly, and James' eyebrows pinch together. "I'm just going to get firewood, is all. Evan is going to stay here with you."

James frowns, then opens his mouth like he's about to reply, then slams it shut when the distant sound of taunting drifts into the cave. It's the death eaters, getting closer, and James looks at Regulus in confusion only for one more moment before his eyes light up with realization. Instantly, he sucks in a sharp breath and starts shaking his head.

"No. No, absolutely not," James declares.

"James, if they find you, they will *kill* you," Regulus states firmly. "You won't be able to run. You won't even be able to stand up to fight, not six fucking people."

"So, what, you want to give them a willing target to focus on instead?" James spits out, sounding more furious than Regulus has ever heard him in his life. "Since when did you start caring so much for my fucking life that you'd put yours on the line? What happened to not hesitating? What happened to *that?"*

Regulus reaches out to grab him by his jaw, forcefully holding his head still as he leans in to lower his voice to a low hiss while staring directly into his eyes. "Make no fucking mistake, James, I still hate the very breath in your lungs. Don't think for a *second* that I care about you more than I care about *me.* I don't care about you *at all.* I have no use for you."

James glares at him. "Then why the *fuck* would you go out there?"

To that, Regulus has no answer. He tightens his grip around James' face and struggles very, very hard not to kiss him. The impulse reaches up and digs its claws in until he almost can't shake himself free. They're both furious, and James looks unfairly good while angry, and Regulus' greater sense flees him when he's angry and also when James looks good. Kissing is obviously not the solution to their disagreement, but the temptation to do it anyway persists.

Regulus hates, hates, *hates* James Potter so much that he could just—he could fucking *kiss him.* Kiss him, and kiss him, and kiss him until they forget how to breathe.

Making a derisive noise, disgusted with himself for the urge, Regulus drops his hand away from James' face and starts to turn away. Immediately, James surges forward to grab onto his arm, holding on so tight that it hurts.

"Wait," James says desperately. "Wait, please don't. Please don't go, alright? Just—"

"What?" Regulus hisses. "Stay here? Let them find us and kill us? Leave you here alone and let them kill you? There is no fucking *solution,* James. I can lead them away, and I actually have a chance of *getting* away, but *you* don't. So, shut up and wait for your fucking medicine."

"Regulus, *please,"* James begs, staring at him with big, sad eyes and genuine panic in his face. "Don't do this. If they find you, they'll kill you, and I—I can't—"

"I'm not dying for you," Regulus cuts in sharply.

James swallows. "I know, but you can still die." Regulus can't argue against that, so he says nothing. James makes a small sound and digs his fingers into Regulus' arm harder. "Just come back. If you have to go, then make sure you'll make it back. Promise me you'll do anything it takes to get back."

Regulus looks at him for a long moment, and there it is again. That stupid, senseless heart flutter. It gets stronger each time it happens, more obvious to the point that he can't ignore it anymore. It's growing in frequency, and it's turning him into the idiot he thought he left behind ten years ago.

Shaking his head ruefully, Regulus rocks forward on the perch of his feet, bringing one hand up to cup the side of James' head. He ducks in and presses a kiss to James' forehead, a result of the heart flutter and the earlier impulse to kiss. He's sort of resigned to how weak it makes him, at least at this moment when he's about to go running directly into danger in a move so uncharacteristic to who he is as a person that it sincerely makes him feel a little ill.

The kiss lingers, and James leans into it, his hand coming up to cup the back of Regulus' where it rests against his cheek and hair. Regulus can't keep his eyes from drifting shut, and he holds there for one beat, then two, and then three before slowly pulling back. James immediately tilts his face up as he draws back, his eyes wide and confused.

Okay, that's fair. Regulus *did* just tell him he hated him and didn't care about him at all less than twenty seconds ago. This is a big leap from *that,* and Regulus knows it. He should probably feel bad about the mixed signals he's sending at the moment, but he honestly doesn't have the time or the luxury.

"What was that?" James whispers, sounding breathless.

"A parting gift," Regulus whispers back, and then he stands up and snatches himself away when James tries to hold onto him.

Regulus wastes no time in pushing himself out of the cave, drawing out both daggers from their holsters. He's left his supplies with James, and given James his hatchet in case of an emergency,

and that will just have to be enough. Does Regulus plan to die? No, he doesn't. Is he aware that there's a good chance he might? Also no, because he's ignoring that.

There's a few seconds where Regulus stands in place, his mind already trying to work through a plan for the best way to do this. It's not too long until it starts to get dark, and cold. The death eaters will retreat back to the cave once they can cross the crimson river, but not if they're on Regulus' heels, so he's going to have to find some way to lose them—only *after* he's gotten them far enough away from James.

In other words, Regulus is going to have to keep the death eaters chasing him for the next two hours, then disappear well enough that they'll give up in favor of getting warm and just try again tomorrow. It's not impossible, but the chances…

What was it that Sirius said one day, sounding so bitter that it was like the words were coated in poison? *The odds are never in your favor.* Yeah, well, Regulus is going to beat them anyway.

"Psst."

Regulus jumps, head snapping up from where he's waiting by the bank, eyes on the woods where the death eaters are steadily getting closer. Evan moves next to him, lips pursed and sword in hand.

"Evan?"

"Do I look like your boyfriend's babysitter to you? That's *your* job, lover boy, not mine," Evan mutters. "I'm not staying here to watch him fret about you."

"Oh?" Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "So, what, you'd like to trade places, is that it? I'll stay here while you go running around with all of them chasing after you?"

Evan hums and gives him an appraising look. "I'm sure you'd love nothing more than to stay with him, but no, I have a different idea. What do you say we…better the odds?"

"The odds of…?" Regulus narrows his eyes.

"Your survival, and his, and mine," Evan explains. "There's six of them, and they all have weapons. We want to draw them away, yeah? Well, what if we split them up?"

Regulus raises his eyebrows. "Easier to get away from, and easier to fight if it comes to that, *and* they'll all have to give up more quickly to meet back up as one group."

"Brilliant, isn't it?" Evan grins at him. "So, you go one way, and I go the other. How does that plan sound?"

"Considering your first plan failed—"

"I beg your fucking *pardon?* That plan was flawless, and it *worked.* Well, at least until that bit at the end, but let's not talk about that. Trust me, this is a good plan."

Trust me. Those two words roll around in Regulus' mind, and he looks at Evan for a long moment in complete silence, coming to terms with the fact that he *does.* He trusts Evan. He was going to trust Evan alone with an injured James, and now he's going to trust him about this.

"Alright," Regulus says, finally. "You go your way, and I'll go mine. And Evan?"

"Yes?" Evan asks.

"Be careful," Regulus mumbles.

Evan grins at him. "Oh, I'm always careful."

"Is that so?" Regulus asks.

"Don't you know, lover boy?" Evan waggles his eyebrows playfully. "I can climb, and no one ever thinks to look up."

Regulus shakes his head, lips twitching. "Come on. If we're doing this, we need to go now and get their attention before they even start to look around."

Evan nods and starts moving, but Regulus hesitates just for a moment to look back at the entrance to the cave, where James remains alone. Injured. Unprotected. Anything could happen to him. *Anything.* But something *will* happen to him if they don't lead the others away, and the risk of that is much greater. Regulus swallows, then turns and forces himself to go.

Quickly, Regulus moves with Evan to stand in place on the other side of the pond. The layout unfurls in Regulus' mind. James is towards the east, and the death eaters approach from the west, which is some kind of fucked up irony. A cruel metaphor for how this could play out. After all, the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. If James is the sun, then Regulus isn't about to let him set today. Fuck that.

It takes a few moments more for the death eaters to reach them. Mulciber is on a warpath, as Regulus predicted. They had the supplies to take care of where Regulus cut off his hand; it's wrapped up securely, and he's holding a sword in his other hand. Bernice's, by the looks of it, because she has Hodge's knife, leaving him with nothing but a stick he must have picked up along the way. Axus has found their hook, and Willa has retrieved one arrow, so she's not completely empty-handed. Quinn has her spear, and she's also sporting raw bruises around her throat.

"You," Mulciber snarls as soon as he sees Regulus.

Regulus smiles and playfully wiggles his fingers in a mocking wave. "Me." He tilts his head. "You seem upset, Mulciber."

"You cut off my fucking hand!" Mulciber snaps.

"I did do that," Regulus agrees.

Mulciber's face twists into a sneer. "I'm going to take your fucking head for that, Black."

"Well, that's a bit excessive," Evan says. He stacks his hands over each other in the air. "Really seems to be escalating things a bit. Have you considered anger management?"

Axus snorts, then disguises it into a cough when Mulciber shoots a glare in their direction. Evan grins at them and winks, as if they never even tried to kill him at one point. Axus looks flustered by this response, and Regulus cannot *believe* this is happening right now. Evan's attractive enough that he probably *could* flirt his way out of being killed. His cheekbones are weapons in their own

right.

"Where's your boyfriend, Black?" Bernice calls. "He and I have a bit of unfinished business."

"Oh, just on his way to the cave," Regulus lies with a smooth laugh. "He's going to clean that place out as soon as the river ices over. Shame you'll be too busy with us to stop him."

"He's bluffing," Quinn says immediately.

Regulus gives a lazy shrug. "Am I? I don't see him around here anywhere. Do you?"

"Willa," Mulciber says slowly.

"Yeah?" Willa asks, hand on her last arrow, even though she hasn't pulled it out yet.

Mulciber narrows his eyes at Regulus, then grits out, "Go back to the cave. You need arrows anyway, and wasting that one on them would be pointless if you can't be sure that you'll manage to hit them. If you see Potter there, kill him."

"You think he's not prepared for that?" Regulus asks, arching an eyebrow as Willa instantly starts backing up to turn and go jogging deeper into the forest.

"I think Potter is too soft," Mulciber retorts. "When it comes to killing, he'll choke."

"Unfortunately for you, I don't have that problem," Regulus says, twirling a dagger between his fingers lazily. He tips his head to the side, lips curled up. "I certainly didn't have that problem when I killed Avery."

"You're dead," Mulciber hisses, raising his sword to point it at him, pure fury flashing in his eyes.

Regulus chuckles and starts backing up. "You'll have to catch me first."

"Get them!" Mulciber shouts, and with that, Regulus and Evan turn to run, splitting in different directions. Regulus goes north, and Evan goes south, and the others break up to follow.

James remains safely to the east.

~•~

A parting gift.

The words ring in James' ears. Regulus has only said them once before, following the declaration that James might die. A parting gift for that purpose—because of possible death.

This time, James isn't the one at the highest risk of dying.

James muffles a small sound in the crook of his elbow and squeezes his eyes shut. They sting, and his heart thumps to a steady beat that feels like *Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.*

It's not right. It's not *fair.* James is supposed to protect him, to do everything he can to get Regulus home, and he's *stuck* here while Regulus is out there being chased by people who want to kill him. James has only ever felt so useless and so frustrated one other time in his life, and that was with Regulus, too.

Somehow, it's always Regulus who makes him feel powerless, like no matter what he tries, he's never doing enough. Like he can *never* do enough. It just makes James want to try harder, and every failure feels like a brand on his heart.

James was supposed to take care of Regulus at fifteen, too. It was Sirius' last request before he went into the arena, the last words he might have ever spoken directly to James, if he hadn't made it home. As hard as James tried, he never could get it right.

Regulus, like Sirius, is stubborn. He was going through something that no one should ever have to deal with. He wanted to be alone. Never wanted to talk. Always disappeared to places that James could never find him.

James used to sit outside on the street waiting for Regulus to come home where he disappeared off to after the games stopped showing in the courtyard. Every day, he tried to talk to him. He begged him to come over to his house. Asked him to dinner, because he was getting so thin. Suggested he stay over at least for a night to get proper rest, because he always looked so tired. Begged him not to go home, because his parents were furious with him every time he ran off, so much that he would have to face their wrath as soon as he went through the door.

Without fail, Regulus brushed him off. With each passing day, he got meaner and more distant, growing sharper when he told James to back off. It bubbled up into an explosion until Regulus was yelling at him. *You're not Sirius! You'll never be Sirius, so stop trying to be,* he'd shouted.

The thing is, James understood. Regulus wanted *Sirius.* He wanted his brother, and no one else was ever going to connect with him when his brother was gone, when Sirius was brushing up against death every day, never safe. James was just a living, breathing reminder of what was lost to them both.

But James was trying so, so hard. He was doing his best to keep it together and giving Sirius' last request his all. Regulus wasn't the only one fraying because Sirius was gone. James had lost his best friend, too. So, James had bubbled over along with him. *Yeah, well, you're not him either,* he'd replied, a tangle of spiking emotions and unwavering hurt.

If James had to guess the exact moment that Regulus *really* started hating him, it would be that one.

James regretted it, of course. He was fifteen, nearly sixteen, and he was dealing with a lot as well, but that didn't stop him from feeling remorse for hurting Regulus. Not only the boy he had feelings for, but someone he'd known for years, and the person Sirius begged him to take care of. So, he apologized. Not that it changed anything. It all stayed the same, and everything fell apart anyway.

At this age, learning all that he has, James knows it wasn't his fault. It wasn't Sirius' fault. It wasn't Regulus' fault. None of them are to blame for this, for where they are now, for all that they've suffered. James is aware that taking care of Regulus now isn't required to make up for how he failed to before.

But he really, *really* wishes that it would.

James made this choice for many reasons, past mistakes and keeping a promise to Sirius among them. Most of all, though, he decided this for himself. A selfish, selfish desire to save the man he's helplessly in love with. And he's failing again.

After all this time, you'd think he'd be used to that by now.

~•~

When Regulus was younger, he used to play hide and seek with Sirius, and eventually James when he came into the picture. Regulus was the best seeker, but that was probably because James and Sirius were *terrible* at being quiet when they hid. It was more than that, too. Regulus has always been observant, and he's got a sharp eye for finding the things he's after.

As for hiding, well, he was always good at that, too. All the hiding and seeking from his youth has prepared him in more ways than he could have expected.

It's certainly helping him now. Mulciber, Bernice, and Axus all chased after him, while Hodge and Quinn went after Evan. Regulus is faster than them, and he uses this to his advantage, staying ahead of them at all times. He runs, and runs, and runs, like maybe he could run forever.

He can't, and neither can those that follow him. Humans are creatures of endurance, so of course they can't just chase each other around for hours on end. Regulus begins a pattern, one that's going to help when it's time to retreat.

Over and over, Regulus gets ahead of them until he finds a good spot to hide in. Behind a tree, usually, or a bush. He waits for the others to catch up, then gets 'discovered' and takes off running again. He leads them further and further away from James in spurts, dangling himself like bait.

They fall for it every time.

Staying one step ahead is key, which is why it's so devastating when Regulus realizes that Mulciber is missing. Bernice and Axus are still hot on his trail at all times, but Mulciber stops showing up. This can either mean that he's gotten lost, fell back due to exhaustion, or found something else to chase after instead. Regulus has no idea where Evan is, but he's heard Quinn and Hodge in the distance a few times, so Mulciber could have gone to help them. Either that, or he's gone back to the crimson river to see if James is really there.

Whatever it is, Regulus doesn't *like* it. In hide and seek, knowing where the other players are is one of the most important parts to help you win. In this game, it's him, Mulciber, Axus, and Bernice. Losing one is concerning.

Unfortunately, it eventually gets late enough that worrying about Mulciber isn't an option. He needs to circle his way back to James, which means shaking Bernice and Axus off. This part won't be simple, but he's made it more simple by leading them into a pattern they're used to by now.

It's the same thing as before—find a place to hide—but, this time, the goal is to not get discovered. Bernice and Axus will keep looking while he sneaks off, waiting for that moment of discovery he's not going to give to them.

"Come on out, Black!" Bernice calls, sounding winded as she and Axus break through the trees. Regulus has stopped running, so they unconsciously know he's hiding.

"Fuck, I'm tired," Axus wheezes. "Bern, we can't keep doing this. We have to head back soon; the temperature is starting to drop. Mulciber said—"

"I know what Mulciber said," Bernice mutters. "Just spread out and look for him, alright?"

"What if we don't find him?" Axus asks.

"Then we'll go meet up with Willa. Maybe Quinn and Hodge will have better luck with Rosier," Bernice says. "But we'll find him. You hear that, Black? We know you're here!"

Regulus rolls his eyes. Yeah, yeah, he hears that, and them knowing he's here is the whole *point.* Idiots.

They're only two people, so they can't really cover much ground, which he uses to his advantage. The thing is, he was always better at hiding than Sirius and James because he *was* good at being quiet. He uses that, too.

People have this thing where their minds fill in information that isn't necessarily true. For example, Regulus can't be crouched near a large rock because they didn't see him in front of it, and when they move past it, he's not behind it either. They don't come over to check, because 'discovering' him has been easy so far; he's made himself obvious and loud on purpose, for this exact reason. It makes them sloppy.

So, with an ease that's almost pathetic, Regulus slips around the rock as they move past it, and the further they go, the farther he gets in the opposite direction. Slowly and silently, he backs away, hiding in places they've already checked and won't think to check again. And then, when he's far enough back that he loses sight and sound of them, he leaves.

Just like that.

It's a lot easier to get away from two people than it is six, especially when he has a head start and he's alone.

Regulus starts making his way back to James, quiet and careful and watchful. He stays alert, even as he puts as much distance between himself and the others as he can. He doesn't know Mulciber's location, so he isn't being reckless.

More time passes, and the temperature continues to drop, the sun dipping low enough that it's growing dark. If the death eaters are smart, they'll be heading back to the original cave now to stay warm for the night, where there's food and supplies waiting for them as well. From what Bernice said, that's the next course of action.

As for Regulus, he's getting closer to the pond, and it's making him eager. He wants to get back and set his eyes on James to make sure he's alright, which is…

Oh, *fuck off.* No. Absolutely not. Regulus isn't doing this. The heart flutters can shrivel up and *die,* is what they can do. It's happened before; it will again. This is the hunger games, and he is *not* about to—

A small twig hits Regulus on the side of his head from up high.

Regulus very nearly crawls out of his skin. He crouches down behind a rock instinctively, raising his dagger, his heart racing in his chest. He follows the direction the twig came from, his head tipping back where he spots Evan in the tree above him. He's grinning down at him as he swings his legs like the lunatic he is. Regulus exhales, relaxing slowly.

Evan makes a vague gesture in the direction of the pond, and Regulus nods. He holds up two fingers, and Evan shrugs. For some reason, they both know what all of that means. Yes, Regulus is heading back to James, and so should Evan. No, Evan doesn't know where Quinn and Hodge are, but he's in a tree, so he's assuming they lost him.

Evan makes a face at him, and Regulus flips him off, fighting a small smile. Evan laughs, seeming unable to help it, and the sound carries.

No one ever thinks to look up—until there's a sound.

It takes only seconds. One moment, Evan is grinning at Regulus, and the next, a spear is flying up to hit him right in the stomach. Evan's smile falls before his body does.

"No," rips free from Regulus' mouth, breathless, and then he stands up and spots Quinn a few steps away from the tree, Hodge standing right next to her.

Regulus' dagger is flying through the air before he's even had the thought. It buries itself directly in Quinn's throat, making her choke as she stumbles back and hits the ground at the same time that Evan does. Hodge makes a weak noise, spooked, and turns to run away.

Regulus doesn't chase him. He goes to Evan.

Evan has landed badly. He fell from up high, and his leg is sticking out at an awkward angle. The spear is still impaled in his stomach, and he's dragging himself back with low noises of pain like he can get away from it. He pushes himself up to lean against the trunk of the tree, hand braced on the handle of the spear as he groans through clenched teeth.

"No, no, don't take it…" Regulus trails off as he hits his knees next to Evan, who has just snatched the spear out with a deep gasp. He shakily drops it, and blood instantly starts flowing. Regulus swallows thickly. "Out. Don't take it out."

"Ow," Evan rasps, his trembling hand coming up to cover his wound. Blood seeps over his fingers.

Regulus leans forward and presses his hands to the wound, too, fingers immediately slick with blood. "Okay, this is—it's fine. If we can get the blood to stop, then we—"

"Regulus," Evan says.

"No," Regulus replies.

Evan huffs out a weak laugh. "I think I broke my leg."

"I'll carry you," Regulus tells him firmly. "I don't doubt that Sirius has sent medicine for James by now, Evan. Just don't bleed out, and you'll be fine when we get there."

"Just don't bleed out, he says," Evan mutters. He shakes his head and looks down at his stomach. "Yeah, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but that's a bit out of my control."

"You're *fine,"* Regulus insists.

"I'm really not," Evan counters, and then he proceeds to cough, and when he does, blood bubbles up past his lips. He grimaces and groans through it, fumbling one hand up to swipe the blood away. "Oh, that's a bad sign."

"Shut up," Regulus croaks, his eyes starting to burn.

"I'm about to, I think. For good," Evan mumbles, his gaze rolling a little unsteadily before finding its way to Regulus. He smiles, just a bit. "Did you get her? Quinn?"

"I got her," Regulus confirms.

"No cannon."

"Yet."

"You're a scary bastard sometimes, you know that?" Evan says, then jolts when the cannon does sound, then winces through the pain of movement. A quiet gasp escapes him.

Regulus glances down and struggles to breathe at the sight of blood slipping through his fingers.

Evan's life, slipping through his fingers. He looks back up.

"I'm sorry I left you on the other side of the river," Evan whispers, looking right at him.

"I told you to. You had to," Regulus murmurs.

"I know," Evan agrees, "but it still felt wrong."

Regulus swallows. "You're a good person, Evan Rosier."

"That's the thing, though. I'm really not." Evan blinks at him slowly. "I just—like you. Isn't that mental?"

"Certifiably insane," Regulus says, his chest feeling tight.

Evan waves his free hand lazily. "I don't mean the way your boyfriend likes you. Just…person to person, I suppose. It's a shame, really. I think—well, I think you're my friend."

"I—" Regulus chokes off, struggling to speak, finding it impossible to say anything of importance. He forces it out, nearly gagging on it, because he knows he wouldn't say it if Evan wasn't dying. He wouldn't have to, because Evan would be alive to just—know. "Yeah, I'm your friend, Evan."

"Have many of those, do you?" Evan asks.

Regulus snorts weakly. "Not really. I'm not exactly…the easiest person to get on with."

"What? No. You're a fucking delight, what are you on about?" Evan mocks through a shit-eating grin.

"No one's ever—" Regulus exhales shakily. "I have a friend at home, just one, but that's…different. I think you two would have gotten on well. But he's—" Regulus stops, because he's not sure how to even begin explaining Barty, who is his friend, yes, but not the way Evan has been. "Well, I'm not the type to have a best friend, but if I were, it would have been you."

"Pity we never met before this, eh?" Evan swallows harshly and looks down at his stomach, then closes his eyes and leans his head back. "Best friends tell each other things that they don't tell anyone else. I'm dying, so you have to indulge me. Didn't expect I'd be using the dying card so soon, but desperate times and all that."

"Yeah, alright," Regulus mumbles, pretty willing to give Evan whatever he wants at the moment, and he has the niggling feeling that there's something Evan wants to say.

"I've never had a friend before you," Evan croaks. "So, you know, thanks for that, I suppose. It—it was nice while it lasted."

"You—" Regulus fumbles for Evan's hand, and their fingers clasp around each other, slipping from the blood. "I'm—Evan—"

Evan hums, and he's slurring when he says, "Your turn, lover boy."

"I miss my brother," Regulus confesses in a whisper, his vision blurring as he feels Evan's grip get looser. The words wrench at him, but they're true. He doesn't say that he's missed his brother for the last ten years, but that's true, too.

"Won't have to miss him for long," Evan breathes out, his hand falling slack. "You're going to win. You…"

Evan doesn't speak after that.

Regulus sits with him, holding his hand, and it's not long before the cannon sounds again. He flinches when it does, then feels such a strong surge of emotion take over him that he quite literally just bursts into tears.

It's instant. He starts weeping so hard that it *hurts,* and he folds forward to press his face to Evan's shoulder. He's still warm, and it's not fair. It's not fair. *It's not fair.*

"Please," Regulus chokes out. "Sirius, *please."*

He doesn't know what he's begging for, really. For Sirius to find some way to fix this. For Sirius to hold him in his grief now when he didn't before. For Sirius to just—be here, because Regulus has just lost the best friend he never even got to have, and because Regulus misses his brother so, so fucking much.

Nothing changes. Sirius doesn't show up, Evan is still dead, and Regulus is left alone with a corpse.

~•~

The gut-wrenching, heart-rending sound of harrowing sobs that falls out of his little brother makes Sirius want to set the world on fire. It makes him want to get his hands on anyone who had anything to do with it and rip them apart.

Regulus never had very many friends growing up. When he was *really* young, he was too shy, and Sirius was always the one who wasn't afraid to talk to people. Sirius had friends in school, even before he met James, but Regulus never did. He's always been quiet, and even that young, he didn't really like people. Even *James* wasn't really his…friend, now that Sirius is thinking about it. It didn't matter how well they got on or how much Regulus actually, genuinely seemed to like him, James was always *Sirius'* friend. His best friend.

Regulus never had one of those. A best friend. There's Barty, and Sirius knows they *are* friends, but it's not… Well, there's something else mixed up in all that they are for them to be best friends. Uncomplicated, simple best friends—the way James and Sirius are. Regulus has never had that.

Until now.

Or something like it. Something that *could have been.* Maybe in another life, they would have been just as close as Sirius and James are. Maybe not. Either way, sometimes there are people that just—recognize each other. Like whatever you're made of, you might be lucky enough to find someone holding a little bit of you in them, and without even knowing it, you've been carrying around a little bit of them before you ever even met.

So, when you do meet, it's like something inside of you starts wriggling around that says *hey, that's me, that's ours, that's us.* Recognition. Connection. Something really, truly special.

Regulus has just watched that die.

Sirius stares at the screen, unable to do *anything* as Regulus releases a muffled shout into Evan's shoulder. It's utterly chilling, a raw scream of pure grief.

The worst part is, Sirius knew it was going to happen. He saw the death eater girl there with her spear. He saw her take aim, then let it fly, and there was nothing he could do. He could only sit here and watch, and cling to Remus' hand, and fall apart just because Regulus is.

Regulus, who said *I miss my brother.* Sirius has been crying ever since. Regulus hasn't said that, or anything even *close* to that, in ten years. Something he doesn't tell anyone else—that's what Evan asked of him, and that's what Regulus went with.

I miss you, too, Sirius had thought, and maybe he whispered it, maybe Remus heard him, or maybe not. He's been crying too incoherently to know. But it's true. He's been missing Regulus for the last ten years.

"I'm sorry, Reggie," Sirius rasps, even though Regulus can't hear him, even though that doesn't change anything. He is so, so fucking sorry. He wishes he could fix this.

He can't, and Regulus continues to weep.

There's often these moments in the arena, when those inside have been pushed and pushed and *pushed,* when they've been nonstop suffering every variety of torment—and then they break. They always break. Everyone has a breaking point. The saddest part is, there's generally *multiple* breaking points.

Some people don't get back up after they reach that point. Most do, but they don't get back up the same person. A few can, and they figure out how to recover as much as they ever will. It usually depends on how badly they've broken down.

Despite the brutality of Regulus' breakdown, he nonetheless gets back up. It's a bit of a process, one that shows just how stubborn he is down to his core; maybe that's a Black family trait, even to their detriment, because Sirius has that same streak within him. In this case, it serves Regulus well.

He cleans his face. He stands up, marches over to rip his dagger from the dead girl's throat, then

moves back over to crouch down beside Evan. He starts carving into the trunk of the tree, his shoulders blocking the view of what he's doing.

"Evan's name?" Remus murmurs. He's been rubbing soothing circles into Sirius' hand since they started watching together. Sirius has been a wreck from the moment he came in through the door, rushing to see what had happened when he left the party after getting medicine sent to James.

Not very much had been happening, at the time. Regulus was still playing hide and seek, which Sirius recognized instantly. He's a smart little bugger, there's no denying that.

"I don't know," Sirius mumbles, waiting to see what Regulus will reveal when he moves out of the way.

It takes a while, and then Regulus stands up and walks away. Sirius sucks in a sharp breath the moment he sees what's there, and Remus curses softly in shock.

Hallow is Hollow

On the screen, the tree goes up in flames.

Sirius swallows harshly and can't bring himself to be upset about how much damage control he's going to have to do tomorrow. Regulus is grieving. Sirius would be no better in his situation, frankly. Hell, he might have been *worse.* The world doesn't know what will hit it if James dies.

Besides, Regulus has made himself *very* popular. The people love him right now, because not only is he entertaining them with all that he's dealing with, he's also dealing with things *very* well. He's smart and capable and fucking ruthless at times. There were literal cheers and chants of his name while he was chopping off Mulciber's hand, though Mulciber's mentor—Lucius—had been *visibly* displeased.

James, too, remains beloved by many. When he killed the man he did, people cheered for him as well. And, well, they're *all* living for Regulus and James' little…romance, or whatever it is. Sirius can't think about it too hard, because he knows them, so he knows that they're not just—playing it up. No, that's them. Every touch, every little comment, every shared look; that's all real, as real as Sirius has ever seen them.

Still, Sirius isn't above using it, if he has to. He sure did, without shame, going to sponsors with their little love story to get every donation he could to send James the medicine he needed to heal his leg. And Sirius will do it again, if he has to.

"Sirius," Remus blurts out, sounding strained, and he's suddenly strangling Sirius' hand.

"What? What is it?" Sirius replies, immediately panicking.

"I found out what Mulciber is doing," Remus says warily, and then he points to the screen, where Mulciber has returned to the pond and is kneeling down next to the closed bear trap, squinting at the blood.

Sirius can practically see the light bulb go off over Mulciber's head. With dread in his veins, Sirius watches as Mulciber stands up and begins his search.

The search for James.

Eyes sinking shut, Sirius whispers, "Fuck."

Chapter End Notes

i want to tell you all how to skip the hard parts, but like, this entire chapter is hard, so??? ill do my best!

for the injuries: it picks up right out the gate from where james got his leg stuck in a bear trap. there is a lot of mentions of pain, as well as blood, and the injury is described briefly in detail. regulus and evan do help him get out of it, and the injury is eventually cleaned and bandaged as much as it can be until the proper medicine can get sent to him.

for the death/murder:

IF YOU WANT TO SKIP THIS PART, SCROLL PAST WHEN REGULUS GETS HIT IN THE HEAD BY A SMALL TWIG AND CROUCHES DOWN BY A ROCK, AND PICK BACK UP WHEN IT'S SIRIUS' POV (but beware that sirius will reference the death that just took place)

if you just want the warning: evan dies, sadly. he is up in a tree and thinks he's managed to evade quinn and hodge. regulus makes him laugh, which catches quinn's attention from where she's close by, and she throws her spear up to hit evan in the

stomach. regulus immediately stands up and launches his dagger at her, hitting her in the throat. evan falls out of the tree, breaks his leg, and bleeds out while regulus sits with him.

to everyone else, who has finished the chapter... im not even gonna ask how you're all feeling, because i can take a pretty good guess.

on a high note, regulus called james baby! the progression of regulus going from calling james a big baby in a mocking way, to calling him baby in tender way makes me go feral. also, the fact that he didn't even notice??? genuinely, he has no idea that he actually did it—and, in his defense, he was too busy losing his collective shit because james was hurt. which, hey, get a clue, reggie. again, in his defense, he's mostly oblivious purely by circumstances, because every time he starts to acknowledge the change of his feelings, some shit goes down that takes all of his focus.

the way that regulus—and sirius—want to protect james and keep him safe and make sure he doesn't get changed the way they've been changed. STOP THAT'S SO FUCKING SAD. what's worse is that james is ALREADY changed, and has been, and there's nothing they can do about it. sirius and regulus are just like me! i, too, want to wrap james up and keep him safe—which none of you probably believe, because i have been putting him THROUGH it.

regulus was a bit of a mess of mixed emotions during their little spat. all tangled up about it. he was quite literally that thing that's like: "you should be addicted to shutting up // you want to fuck me so bad that it makes you look stupid" 😭😭😭 literally, he was like: god i hate you, i wanna make out with you SO BAD. yeah, he's unwell, too.

but then the forehead kiss ☹ why did he have to make it sad by calling it a parting gift???? leave him alone, he was dealing with a lot at the time. he was doing his best, okay? and james deserves forehead kisses.

and then...evan...

oof, that hurts. because, well, he's been a delight in this fic. not saying he was a good person—he actually had all plans to kill everyone from the trees and make it home. like, that was his goal from the start, but then he met regulus, and that plan got derailed. he made a friend, and it got him killed. but, if it comforts anyone to know, he didn't regret it—being regulus' friend for that short time. all of his plans failed, but he didn't really mind, because he had a friend. that's so fucking sad, let me stop.

you know, when i wrote evan's death, i was pretty fucking emotional, because i got super attached to fanon evan through writing just lovers and intermission, so writing him dying was just. really hard. but then, out of nowhere, Another One Bites The Dust started playing on my playlist, and i was literally just sitting there, laughing and a little teary-eyed because evan would have thought that was the funniest fucking thing. he would have been DELIGHTED to know that song played while he died. rip evan my beloved <3 you will be missed.

also, briefly touching on sirius. he is STILL going through it, yes, but that whole part where regulus said he missed him and was calling his name as he pleaded for him to do something??? gut-wrenching. the fact that they both miss each other and have been for the last 10 years??? devastating. we do see more of sirius and his feelings on everything next chapter. we see a lot of wolfstar over the next few chapters!

number update:

tributes remaining: 12
tributes who have died so far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan (😔)
eight unnamed/unknown others

i have a feeling i will not know peace after this, so im gonna hide while everyone yells at me. sorry, i love you all. at least you have two days to recover!!

UPDATING ON TUESDAY

Shutting Down

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!! im posting a little early because a friend asked me to, and it's technically tuesday. everyone say thank you, liv <3

warnings for this chapter:

-graphic depictions of violence
-murder/death
-mentions of blood
-dissociative amnesia from an outsider's perspective
-vague hints to torture (you might not notice, it's very blink-and-you-miss-it, but still, just to be safe)

as always, i will be putting in depth warnings in the end notes for those of you who need/want it to be spoiled for you, which is always valid!

the beginning of this chapter is rough, very heavy and quite brutal, so please be warned and take care of yourselves FIRST, and always. (though, some of you might be delighted because, admittedly, it's not really like anyone is going to be upset by who dies, so maybe that'll comfort you). even still, i just wanted to warn, and if it helps at all, im switching things up and giving a rough start but an easier ending, rather than the other way around that i usually do!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James hears the scuff of a shoe outside the entrance of the cave, and his heart leaps as he whips his head towards it. There have been two cannons, one right after the other, and he's barely been breathing ever since.

Maybe it's stupid, but James refuses to even consider the possibility that it's Regulus, despite *knowing* that the chances are… Well. He simply doesn't accept that, not without proof, and there's still some part of him that's sure he would *know,* somehow. It's not just a silly, romantic notion; he genuinely thinks that, on a fundamental level, everything would *shift* if Regulus wasn't in the world anymore.

His optimism wilts when the vines are sliced through carelessly, making a large gap for Mulciber to step into. James is moving before he even makes the decision to, bracing one hand on the wall and putting all his weight on his good leg as he hobbles to full height. He keeps his hatchet gripped in one hand and keeps the other against the cave to remain steady.

Mulciber stands still in the entrance with a sword in hand, his other wrist wrapped neatly where

Regulus removed his hand. He looks at James up and down, then snorts.

"Well," he says, gesturing towards James' leg with his wrapped wrist, "it looks like both of us are at a disadvantage, hm?"

"A bit," James admits.

"Suppose that evens things out between us," Mulciber muses.

James purses his lips. "Well, I don't know, it's definitely different, isn't it? I mean, you could actually just turn around and walk away, but I don't have that option."

"True," Mulciber concedes, nodding, "but *you* can use two hands to fight, and I can't."

"Right, but you still have both elbows," James points out.

Mulciber hums. "That I do, and you still have both knees. Might hurt to move that leg, but you still can. I really do think this is evenly matched, honestly."

"I'm not sure if that's how it works," James mutters.

"Maybe not." Mulciber shrugs. "But, well, I actually wouldn't care if it was an even match either way."

James sighs. "Should've seen that coming."

"You really should have," Mulciber agrees with a chuckle. He swings the sword lazily in his hand in a move that James doesn't want to admit is cool. "Your boyfriend is very clever, Potter, do you know that?"

"I do know this about him, yes," James says.

"It's just, his confidence in his own cleverness makes him forget that he's not the only clever person in the world. I just so happen to be rather clever myself," Mulciber tells him, lazily leaning up against the cave wall. "He got us to send Willa away, said you were heading to the starting point to steal all our supplies, and he's a good liar, I'll give him that."

"Sounds to me like you're not as clever as you claim to be."

"Oh, I wouldn't call that a moment of stupidity. I'd say it was more…caution, just in case. I won't lie, I did fall for his little plan to start with. Chased after him for quite a bit, but I can't be blamed for that. I *really* wanted to kill him."

"Failed with that, did you?" James asks lightly, flexing his fingers around the handle of his hatchet, his heart thumping hard in his chest. He just. He *needs* to know that Regulus is alright, and if he can get Mulciber to slip up…

Mulciber just grins at him, looking far too pleased with himself, which makes James' heart sink. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Potter. See, I had a thought. I mean, it was *your* screams that drew us in this direction, you know. I started thinking, and I wondered…if you were fine and heading to the starting point, why were you screaming so much? I gave it a bit more thought, and I asked myself…why was Black just waiting for us? Seemed almost *eager* to be chased, didn't he? And of course he'd never get too far away from his precious boyfriend, would he? So, where were you?"

"Well, you found me. Want a sticker?" James says sarcastically.

"You're a funny man, Potter," Mulciber replies with a laugh, and it's a *mean* laugh, sharp and triumphant. "I couldn't be sure, of course, so I decided to check back here to make sense of it all. Imagine my surprise when I find a closed bear trap with blood on it. That told me all I needed to know."

James stares at him blankly. "Yes, yes, very clever. Are you done gloating now?"

"You know, it's a shame you didn't join us when we offered," Mulciber says, shaking his head. "I think we would have worked well together."

"You're delusional, then," James announces.

Mulciber clicks his tongue. "Oh, come off it, Potter. You're *strong,* there's no denying it, and if you weren't so fucking soft, that would actually mean something. We could have made you into something, you know that? And Black? Well, we would have let you look away as we killed him, slowly."

James goes still, his face dropping as his gaze sharpens on Mulciber, whose lips curl up into a malicious little smile. It's like the temperature in the cave drops, and James' skin crawls as his ears start to ring. The insinuation makes bile rise in James' throat, but more than that, there's pure fucking *fury.*

There's barely a breath between Mulciber's last word and James launching the hatchet right at him with all his might, not even hesitating as the instinctive need to *protect* rises up in him, and there's also the need to remove this fucking scum of a human being from the world. Mulciber raises his arm to block it with a look of surprise flitting across his face, and then he's roaring in pain as the hatchet buries itself in his arm that's already missing a hand. He drops his sword to fumble for the handle, ripping it out with a scream.

James doesn't give one fuck about his hurt leg at the moment. In his anger and adrenaline, he barely even feels it as he launches himself forward, tackling Mulciber to the ground. They go sailing back through the cave, rolling down the incline until they hit even ground.

Mulciber lands on top, and he still has the hatchet, which he promptly raises up with a snarl and immediately brings down. James yelps and dodges to the left, staring wide-eyed at where the hatchet is buried into the ground right where his head just was. Mulciber starts to tug it out, but James punches him in the face, throwing his weight to the side.

They roll away from the hatchet, and James slams him down, then proceeds to punch him in the face again, then again, then *again,* and then once more. His hand aches. Mulciber has blood on his face, but he just bears his bloodied teeth into a grin and kicks James right in his injured leg.

"Fuck!" James shouts as pain explodes through him, his leg giving out, making it easy for Mulciber to shove him off.

Mulciber tries to hold James down with his arm, but the wound where the hatchet landed makes him cry out and fall forward. He's bleeding profusely, and it gets on James' throat, on his face, in his mouth. Mulciber self-corrects and lifts himself up, holding his injured arm close to his chest as he balls his other hand into a fist and hits James *hard.*

James grabs a handful of dirt and leaves, tossing it in Mulciber's face—his eyes, primarily—to

make him flinch. He hisses and rocks back, which James uses to his advantage to flip him. They scramble over each other with grunts and low snarls of anger and pain, like two animals in a fight to the death—and that's what they are, isn't it?

That's what they've been turned into.

"I'm going to *kill you,* Potter," Mulciber spits out, reaching up to dig his fingers into James' cheek where he was sliced earlier, causing it to bleed and sting.

Again and again, they roll and hit each other over and over, making each other bleed. It's all going so fast, and James is stripped down to the relentless need to survive, fighting as hard as he can. There's no space for anger, because everything narrows down until all he knows is the heart beating in his chest and the determination to not let it stop.

They end up next to the hatchet again, and James stumbles to his feet, yelping at the pain when he puts weight on his bad leg. He limps and stumbles, but manages to snatch the hatchet out of the ground. As soon as he's standing over Mulciber, breathing hard, seconds from burying it in his chest until he *stops fucking moving,* Mulciber kicks out with *force* and slams his boot directly into James' leg.

James crumbles helplessly, the hatchet falling from his grip and skidding away across the ground. Instantly, he and Mulciber start crawling for it, and James is closer. He's just snatched it up when Mulciber grabs him by the back of his hair, snapping his head back before shoving him face-first into the ground. It hurts, a throbbing pain immediately starting up, but James doesn't think anything breaks. There's blood in his mouth, and he doesn't know if it's his.

On the next yank, James sends his elbow back as hard as he can, which makes Mulciber gasp and loosen his grip. James immediately throws himself to the side and desperately flings himself on top of Mulciber with the hatchet in hand. He raises it up and brings it down, but Mulciber catches it by the handle with his hand, his fingers overlapping with James' as his arm shakes from the exertion of trying to not let James push it down into his chest. James pushes harder.

"What—what are you even fighting for?" Mulciber grits out through clenched teeth. "Your boyfriend is already *dead."*

James falters.

He can't help it. Those words take him out at his knees, hurting worse than anything that's happened to him so far. Mulciber laughs and elbows him in the face, ripping the hatchet from his hand and pushing to get on top.

"That's right," Mulciber declares triumphantly, his words coming out in sharp bursts as his chest heaves. "You heard those two cannons, yeah? One was your boyfriend."

"No," James chokes out, hands flinging up to stop the hatchet when Mulciber swings it down. The blade of it slices into one palm, but Mulciber keeps pushing.

"Yes," Mulciber counters gleefully.

"You're *lying!"* James bursts out, because he refuses—he just *won't* believe that. He can't believe that.

"I made sure it hurt, Potter. He was crying and begging for his brother," Mulciber grits out, throwing his weight forward to push the hatchet down further.

The words get to him. It's—well, survival is about will, even more than capabilities, and there's some sort of inner strength it takes to *keep fighting.* The idea of what Mulciber is saying saps that strength right out of him, which translates rather literally. His arms give out a little bit, and the blade of the hatchet presses into his chest, almost pushing in.

James remembers when Pandora said that the hunger games are more than just physical; they're mind games, too. He's never felt that more starkly than he does at this moment.

Mulciber presses forward, and James gasps as the hatchet pushes into his chest, a low whine escaping him from the pain that just radiates *everywhere.* It's nothing, *nothing,* compared to the pain at the thought that Regulus might be dead. The thing is, pain reminds you that you're alive, and if it's true—please, *please* don't let it be true—then there's still one last thing James has to do before he loses the will to survive altogether.

"His brother won't even fucking recognize him after I got through with him," Mulciber hisses. "I made him—ow, *fuck!"*

James shoves his knee up between Mulciber's legs a second time, and this time, he pushes with all

the strength he has left. Mulciber goes sailing to the side, groaning as he lands on his back, and then James is on him.

Hitting him. Hitting him. Hitting him.

Mulciber doesn't even get a chance. James just keeps hitting him until the hatchet drops to the ground, Mulciber's wet, labored breathing ringing in his ears. James can't really see him in the low light, and he wouldn't be able to in broad daylight, because his vision is blurring with tears. It's anger, and pain, and so many other things, and somehow nothing at all. James chokes out a harsh breath and fumbles for the hatchet, and this time, Mulciber is too beaten to stop him.

The hatchet lands in the middle of his chest. Mulciber chokes, his whole body jerking from the impact. As soon as James pulls the hatchet free, Mulciber coughs up blood.

James brings it down again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The cannon sounds.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Mulciber isn't moving anymore.

Again.

Again.

Again.

James chokes on a sob, staring down at the chest in front of him. It's practically ribbons. There's blood everywhere on everything. The hatchet, his hands, the ground, the body. Blood. So much blood.

The hatchet hits the ground, and James slumps to the side, landing on his back next to Mulciber's body, where he proceeds to weep so hard that it's hard to breathe. His mind is one long litany of *Regulus, Regulus, Regulus.*

Regulus.

Regulus.

Regulus.

~•~

The sound of a cannon shakes Regulus out of his daze. It rings in his ears as the world snaps back into focus. He feels simultaneously like no time has passed since Evan died and also as if it's been years. Everything has a fuzzy quality to it, and there's a steady pulse of pain in the center of his chest.

That pulse of pain shifts into panic immediately when the cannon sounds, and then he's running.

Regulus isn't too far from the pond, so it doesn't take long to break through the trees. He instantly starts towards the east because that's where James is supposed to be, only to come to a screeching halt when he sees the shape of two bodies lying towards the west. One of them is James.

"No," Regulus whispers, breathless, the very tips of his fingers tingling as he scrambles to throw himself in that direction. He sprints around the edge of the pond, rushing right for the bodies. "No, no, no. James?"

There's a soft sob, and it's James, and Regulus has never been so relieved to hear such sorrow in his *life*. He tosses himself on the ground next to James, who sucks in a deep gasping breath and shifts towards him. Regulus is already reaching for him, dragging his top half into his lap, arms wrapping around him as he curls up and presses his face into Regulus' stomach.

"James," Regulus says, and then he can't stop saying it. He chants the name like a prayer. "James, James, James."

James.

James.

James.

Regulus doesn't even care about Mulciber's body right next to them. That doesn't matter. Nothing matters but James right now, alive and breathing. Regulus folds forward and presses his face into James' hair, holding him close.

He doesn't know if they're both crying, or if they're not. He doesn't know how much time passes, or if it even does at all. Everything narrows down to this, and it could be seconds or hours before the world creeps in around the edges again.

They breathe. James is making little hitched noises in his throat, but he's no longer weeping. His whole body is shivering, and Regulus doesn't know if it's because of the cold or because of…what happened.

What did happen? Regulus raises his head to look at Mulciber. He's… It's bad. Brutal. There's a lot of blood, and Mulciber's chest is cracked open and caved in, a complete mess.

Regulus stares at it, feeling numb.

"Okay," Regulus says out loud, his voice shockingly steady. He exhales and focuses back on James. "Okay, let me look at you. Are you hurt? James?"

James unravels away from him, slowly easing himself up from Regulus' lap, moving like he's in a lot of pain. He exhales heavily, then sways harshly, his eyes fluttering. His face is swollen and bloody.

"Reg'lus," James slurs.

"Hey. *Hey,* look at me," Regulus says sharply, hands lifting to cup James' face. He immediately sags into his palms and goes limp, crumbling forward. Regulus curses under his breath and catches him, James' head rolling on his shoulder. Regulus pats his cheek, the one that's not bleeding again. "James?"

Nothing.

"Fuck," Regulus mumbles, blowing out a deep breath. James is still breathing, so he's just passed out.

Right, well, maybe that's for the best. Regulus can get him back into the cave easier that way, at least without causing him too much pain.

James is bigger than him, and taller, and Regulus is really fucking exhausted and sporting injuries of his own, but nothing short of immediate death could stop him from getting James to safety, where Regulus can check him over. And it's cold now, the sun officially gone and the temperature sinking at a rapid rate. They're going to need a fire tonight.

So, with a grunt, Regulus shifts to gather James up in his arms, then pushes to his feet. He falls right back down, not at all prepared for James' dead weight. *Not dead,* Regulus snaps in his own head in a reprimand. Somehow, the mere insinuation infuriates him enough that he manages to stand back up from his knees. He curses, then grits his teeth as he starts to walk.

He practically runs and stumbles to the cave, trying to make it there as quickly as possible, which is difficult to do in the dark like this. He's groaning by the time he makes it, but he does indeed make it. The entrance is conveniently cut open for him, at least, but then he nearly trips over a sword that he assumes Mulciber must have dropped.

Regulus puts James down as gently as he can, lying him out flat. The first thing he does is fumble for his supplies, finding his matches. He curses again and bolts to his feet to rush outside to get sticks and proper kindling, pausing long enough to grab the hatchet before rushing back.

His hands are shaking so bad that it takes him a few moments to start the fire, but the inside of the cave lights up when he does. Regulus immediately starts looking around for the medicine he wholeheartedly *knows* Sirius sent them, but he can't find it. Frowning, he pushes to his feet and leaves the cave, swinging his head around as he looks.

In a tree. The parachute hanging on a branch. Lovely.

Regulus scowls, his jaw clenching. The gamemakers send those in, and they can put them wherever they want, which means they purposefully kept it out of James' reach, *knowing* he wouldn't be able to climb to get it.

There's already so much anger at the gamemakers because of Evan, and now this. All of this. Regulus' fingers twitch with the urge to do something very, very fucking awful.

Shaking his head, Regulus rushes forward to go to the tree, a lump forming in his throat when he thinks about how easily Evan would have scaled up to get it. Regulus does it with a lot less finesse, and it's so *stupid* that he's still scared. After all that he's seen, that he's *done,* how is he scared of *this?*

But he is, and he does it anyway. He climbs up and cuts down the container, then scurries right back down, breathing easier as soon as he's on solid ground. Snatching up the container, he heads right back towards the cave.

Halfway, the sound of a Hallow heli-carrier approaches, the trees swaying and the wind whipping as it gets closer. Regulus can't stop himself from looking back to watch the coffin-like cage that opens into a claw sink down and scoop Mulciber's body up, lifting him out before flying away again.

Regulus watches it go, feeling nothing, and then he continues into the cave.

James is still passed out.

Exhaling deeply, Regulus moves over and sinks down to settle beside him. First he opens the container, and he could cry when he sees the two wrapped rolls of bread on top. A weak noise escapes him, because he hasn't eaten anything since the dried meat and berries that he and James had…yesterday.

Yesterday feels like a lifetime ago.

Hands trembling, Regulus lifts the rolls out like they're made of gold, and he tips his head back to breathe out, "Thank you," hoping that Sirius knows he's talking to him and no one else.

Regulus sits the rolls aside, then digs out the smaller canister. He unscrews it, tipping it towards the fire to see it better. It's paste, colorless and odorless, but Regulus doesn't doubt that it's the Hallows special brew. They have access to medicines that work miracles; it could save many lives in the district, but the Hallow doesn't let *them* have access to it.

Putting that down, Regulus reaches in to draw out the last thing that's in there. A small, white card —the message that Sirius can send with it. The messages are seen before they're sent in to keep any helpful information from being given, like it's cheating in some way, as if survival is a game. Sirius can't send in instructions or give up locations or any other tips that betray the other tributes. He can, however, send coded messages that Regulus and James would understand or work out because they know him so well.

On the card, it just reads: "Baby"

That's it.

Regulus stares at it, lips pressed into a thin line, mind working in circles. The quotations were put there on purpose, and it doesn't take Regulus long to realize that Sirius is quoting *him.* When he called James 'baby'. Because apparently he did. He doesn't remember doing it, and to be fair, he was a little busy freaking out about James' leg to care too much about what was falling out of his mouth. Why does that even *matter?*

It doesn't make sense, not at first. Sirius wouldn't waste a message just to tease him. Actually, no, he would probably be *very* tempted to, and he'd love it if he could manage to tease Regulus at the same time that he's helping him, but how exactly does this fucking help?

He glances from the card, to the rolls, to the medicine, to James, then back to the card—and that's

when it clicks.

You've got to be fucking joking, Regulus thinks in a rising sense of disbelief, his face twisting into a scowl. So, the medicine and food was about James and Regulus' relationship? The people love them so much that this is like a *reward* to them? So, what, if Regulus doesn't play into it, they won't get anything else? Live-saving offers are dependent on how much they please the Hallows with their fucking *love story?*

Regulus wants to scream. He squeezes his eyes shut, then crumbles the card up in his fist, grinding his teeth. Slowly, he exhales through his nose and opens his eyes, tossing the card into the fire with a glare. He's just—he does *not* have the emotional stability to deal with that right now.

He focuses on James instead.

First, he handles James' leg. He has to go out and get fresh water in Evan's bowl, freezing the whole way there and then back. It's getting dangerously cold again. Once he's back, he wrings out the cloth and reveals James' leg, taking off the bandages with care.

It's worse than it was when he last saw it. Now there are dark bruises that put a lump in Regulus' throat. Guilt threatens to choke him as he cleans James' leg carefully, and James doesn't stir, not even when Regulus smooths the salve on his leg.

Next, Regulus goes to his cheek. There's blood all over his face and throat that Regulus diligently cleans away, repeatedly dipping the cloth and wringing it out over and over again. His hands are freezing, but he doesn't stop. Regulus puts the salve on his cheek, and that's when James wakes up.

"Reg?" James rasps, his eyes fluttering open.

"I'm here," Regulus murmurs, ducking his head and gently pushing James' head back to smear a line of salve along James' throat where Mulciber's sword nicked him earlier. It's just a thin line, but Regulus does it anyway. "Are you hurt anywhere else, James? Did Mulciber get you anywhere else?"

"He—my chest—the hatchet—" James sounds disoriented, still a little out of it, still half-asleep.

Regulus inhales sharply, his heart dropping. He slowly reaches out with numb fingers to open

James' coat. His fingers bump into something, a cold pin that makes his breath hitch. It's in the shape of the sun, and he thinks about his own star pin, the one Gideon gave him. James told him that they killed Fabian in front of him, much the same way they did Gideon.

That infuriates him, too, but it also…scares him. All of this goes beyond just the arena and gamemakers. Behind it all is Riddle, and he's a very, very powerful man. The type of man who kills people in the form of a warning.

Regulus thinks about the message he carved into the tree by Evan's body, and he goes cold all over. He doesn't have a lot of people in his life who matter to him, but there's Barty. There's Sirius. He even thinks of Remus, Pandora, and Dorcas. Even his parents—horrible as they are—cross his mind.

And James. Oh. *James.*

Riddle could kill them all.

Swallowing harshly, Regulus feels his defiance flicker like a candle in the wind. He's so tired, and the fear makes him want to curl up and never move again. Never make a mistake again. He takes a deep breath and tucks the pin out of sight, in the fold of James' coat, then focuses on the wound on his chest.

There's so much blood that it takes Regulus a bit to find it. James' shirt has a tear through it, and when he pushes it open, he can make out where the hatchet was pushed into the flesh. It's not too deep, but the sight of it makes Regulus' stomach cramp. He carefully wipes away the blood and applies salve to that, too, then zips James' coat back up.

"Regulus?" James says, like he's discovering him all over again. He blinks harshly, as if he's not sure this is real.

"I'm here," Regulus tells him again, because he'll tell James that as many times as he needs to hear it. He can't say what he should, can't get the words out. *I'm sorry I left. I'm sorry I didn't make it back in time. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.*

"You're here," James repeats, and then he's surging forward with a surprising burst of strength to drag Regulus into his arms. He clings to Regulus, hugging him so tight that it hurts, and Regulus lets him. James snatches back quickly, hands flying up to frame Regulus' face. "Is this real? He said

—he said he—I thought he—"

"Mulciber?" Regulus asks, and James' mouth snaps shut with a harsh click. His hands slip off Regulus' face as he sways back, and he looks—hurt. All twisted up inside. Something passes through his eyes, and then he lowers them, like he can't bear to meet Regulus' gaze. "Give me your hands."

Wordlessly, James complies. Regulus cradles James' hands in his lap and gently, carefully cleans the blood off of them. His knuckles are busted and swollen, so Regulus applies salve to those as well, which draws James' attention.

"What's that?" James asks.

"The medicine Sirius sent. I've already taken care of your leg, face, and chest," Regulus says quietly.

James shifts to sit up further, craning his head to locate the canister, and then he's tugging it towards him with one hand while Regulus smears salve on the slice in his other palm.

Regulus' head is ducked, so he starts a little in surprise when he feels James' thumb glide along the cut on his cheek that is already mostly healed by now, the one Avery gave him. James' touch is gentle, and Regulus looks up at him through his eyelashes and a curtain of curls.

James keeps stroking his cheek, even when there's no need to, and they don't say anything. Not a word passes between them as Regulus cradles his other hand and James cradles his face. Despite everything, Regulus still has his heart flutters.

This isn't really the time or place, though, and they've dealt with too much today for it to be anything other than weak within him. It's not even yearning. Regulus is too tired, too worn out, too *hurt* to yearn for anything at all.

"Let me see your shoulder," James murmurs, dropping his hand to gently tug at Regulus' coat.

Honestly, Regulus forgot about where Axus' hook caught him in the shoulder—twice—but the reminder makes him realize that there's a twinge there. James helps him pull his coat and the collar of his shirt to the side, down over his arm, revealing where the hook got him. From the angle, the

hook thankfully didn't dig in too deep, but it's obvious where it caught his skin. There's a puncture wound—rather shallow—and a red scrape that runs up a bit.

James is gentle when cleaning away the dried blood, then just as tender when applying the salve. His fingers are warm, and Regulus' eyes flutter shut at the intimacy of this moment. It's just the front of his shoulder, but the feeling of James' fingers there feels both entirely too good and far too important.

"Side," James instructs next, pulling Regulus' shirt back into place before wringing out the cloth.

Regulus does as he's told, dutifully leaning back and easing up his coat and shirt as he cranes his head to peer down at the gash on his side with a grimace. He hadn't forgotten about this one, very aware of the pain, but he's been ignoring it.

It looks bad, which is confirmed a moment later when James hisses between his teeth like he's just been burned. Regulus presses his lips into a thin line, looking at the wound. It's red and swollen, completely inflamed. He wouldn't be surprised if infection already set in, but maybe it hasn't. Maybe, even if it has, the medicine will fix it anyway.

James is so, so very careful when cleaning away the dried blood. It still hurts enough for Regulus to squeeze his eyes shut tight, reaching one hand up to brace it against James' shoulder, holding on too tight and not even meaning to. James murmurs apologies, using his free hand to rub soothing circles into Regulus' arm where it's raised.

There's not much salve left. It's not like they sent very much, unwilling to give them *too* much help, so James honestly has only a bit to work with. He drags his finger along the inside of the canister, gathering every last drop to gently apply it to the puffy wound. Regulus bites his lip and tries his best to swallow a whimper, but the skin is so raw that even *breathing* on it would feel like poking him with a branding-iron.

"I'm sorry, love. I know, I know, I'm almost done," James whispers, and he's not lying. A few seconds later, he draws back and nods for Regulus to lower his shirt and coat.

"Thank you," Regulus says quietly, settling back down and reaching over to dig around for the water canister in his bag that's still full from earlier. He sits it down and picks up the bread, offering one roll to James, who blinks at it in pure shock. Regulus' lips twitch weakly. "Sirius says hi."

James looks like he could cry. He chokes out a soft laugh and reaches out to take the bread, legitimately bringing it up to his face to inhale deeply, eyes fluttering shut. He presses a kiss to it and looks up to mumble, "Sirius, I fucking love you."

The lack of a response is deafening.

"Drink some water," Regulus murmurs, pushing the canister towards him, then focusing on his own bread.

In silence, they drink water and slowly, oh so slowly, eat their bread in tiny pieces, cherishing it next to the crackling fire. Neither of them speak or look at each other. Regulus is really tired, as well as cold, and he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't want to say anything, because the idea of talking just exhausts him more. He doesn't even want to feel right now.

Due to the cold, he's numb pretty much all over, and he sort of prefers it. He wants to be numb on the inside, too, but he can't figure out how to—disconnect. Everything is just too much. *Trojan Horse,* he thinks almost desperately, inwardly pleading for it now more than ever. It's not working. All he can think about is Evan.

When the water and bread is gone, Regulus 'cleans up', just to give himself something to do. He puts the canister for the salve aside with the paper that was wrapped around the rolls inside it, then puts his empty water canister in his bag so he can fill it again tomorrow. He drags out the blanket, passing it to James, who takes it without a word, and then he adds a few more sticks to the fire. The silence drags on.

Eventually, James breaks it to whisper, "Regulus?"

"Yes?" Regulus replies quietly.

"Is…?" James trails off, and Regulus looks over to see him swallowing harshly. There's a sad quality to his big, brown eyes, and Regulus knows exactly what he's going to say even before he asks, "Where's Evan?"

Regulus stares at him, feeling that awful pulse in his chest, and then he looks away as he says, flatly, "Dead."

James is silent for a long moment, and then his voice is so soft and remorseful as he replies, "Regulus, I'm so sor—"

"Don't," Regulus cuts in sharply as soon as James' hand reaches out to settle on his arm. He pulls away from it, *snatches* away, and he feels his anger spike again.

He wants to yell at James, even though it's not his fault. He wants to rewind time and force Evan to stay behind with James, because then maybe all of the things that went wrong wouldn't have, but it's too late for that now. He wants to rant about how unfair it is, because all of it *is* unfair—the fact that the *one* person Regulus has ever chosen or dared to trust by *learning* to is lost to him; how all of James' fucking allies are perfectly fine in some cave somewhere while doing *nothing;* the way none of them should even be in this fucking arena in the *first place;* or even the injustice in having found a friend different from any other in just enough time to lose him.

"Regulus," James says, his voice strained.

"Stop. Just stop. Just leave me *alone,"* Regulus bursts out, fully turning away as his eyes start to sting, and just like that—just that easily—he disconnects. He shuts down immediately. There it is. Trojan Horse. Fucking *finally.*

James retreats and falls silent.

Regulus lets him.

~•~

Remus' heart aches as he watches the banners play out on the screen. It's clearly visible to James and Regulus inside the cave from the angle of the entrance, because they're both watching it. Peter and Irene have exited their cave to see who's gone, leaving Mathias to keep winding thin logs together, while Vanity's main job seems to be not freezing to death. Bernice, Axus, and Hodge all made it back to the original cave and made it across the iced river where Willa was waiting for them, and they're all watching as well. The last girl on her own—Juniper—has once again burrowed into the ground, and she doesn't come out to see who's dead.

It goes in order.

First, there's the woman who died the previous night from dehydration and hypothermia after the banners had already played. After that is the man James killed that attacked Regulus.

James makes a small sound on the screen, staring up at the sky, his throat bobbing harshly. Regulus looks at him briefly, but he doesn't speak, and he looks away when James drops his gaze in obvious shame.

There's Quinn, who Regulus killed. Following that is Evan.

When his face appears in the sky, James once again makes an obvious attempt to comfort Regulus, who shakes him off and scoots further away from him. His face is blank. He doesn't cry; he doesn't look sad, or angry, or hurt; he's just—empty. James retreats again, looking back at the sky.

Lastly, there's Mulciber. As soon as James sees his face in the sky, he presses his lips into a thin line and looks away. He doesn't move until the banners stop playing.

Peter and Irene go back inside to update the others, and everyone seems relieved that James is still alive. The death eaters are upset. Axus starts ranting about their numbers dwindling, sounding genuinely terrified, and Hodge cries. Bernice remains stoic, only her eyes blazing with emotion. It's anger. Pure rage. A woman scorned.

The camera cuts back to James and Regulus. James is spreading out the blanket, mumbling, "Regulus, you need to get warm. Please just—"

"I'll come when I put the fire out for the night," is Regulus' cold response, and his tone allows for no further arguments.

James says nothing else, curling up under the blanket, and Regulus remains next to the fire, hunched over with his knees pressed to his chest. He's still looking at the sky. James turns his back to him and closes his eyes.

It's not long before the arena fades out, and Rita comes on screen, immediately chattering away excitedly. She starts off about how fiercely James fought Mulciber, and then the screen goes black as Sirius lifts the remote, then puts it down.

Silence drapes over them, heavy.

Remus can't tear his eyes away from the screen just yet. It's been five years since he watched the games, and he's only just now realizing how the distance from it has affected him. Despite the fact that he watched them his whole life, the brief pause in between has made him forget how fucking *cruel* they are. Well, no, he never forgot, but he's not as desensitized to it as he was. Or maybe it's just because he cares so much about James and Regulus, as well as *Sirius.*

Whatever it is, Remus struggles with his discomfort. How anyone could watch that—any of it—and be genuinely entertained is beyond him. It sickens him.

This is hard. Really, *really* fucking hard. Having to watch this is a different form of torment, and they *do* have to, because it's imperative that they know what Regulus and James are doing. Sirius, especially. Remus wishes he could just—shield Sirius from it, even if he had to watch alone and give Sirius a watered down summary of the events, but that's not possible. Sirius is trapped in this just as much as his brother and best friend, just from the other side. It's all fucked.

Sirius has had it rough today. Well, he's had it rough this entire time, but he's genuinely been a wreck tonight compared to the previous ones. Between James' first kill, he and Regulus being chased, then captured before getting away with Evan's help, *then* James stepping into a bear trap, followed by Regulus and Evan leading the death eaters away, which led to Evan dying, *and then* James' fight with Mulciber—well, Sirius has likely felt every emotion on the possible spectrum for humans to feel, and then some. He's been *so* fucking stressed.

Sirius has cried. He has shouted in fear. He has held his breath and held Remus' hand in a death grip, and he has let go. He has fallen silent, stood up to pace, sank down to the floor while rocking back and forth with his hands in his hair. He has crawled back into his seat and gone very, very still.

That's what he's doing now. When Remus looks over at him, Sirius is just—sitting there. With one look, Remus knows he's gone. He can't pinpoint when, exactly, it happened, but Sirius did become strangely quiet mere moments after Mulciber pressed the hatchet into James' chest. He got back into his seat without a word, and now he's here, but he isn't here.

Remus swallows. "Sirius."

Immediately, Sirius looks over at him and blinks, but it's not… It *is* him, but he's hidden away, like a curtain has come down within him. Remus can tell by his eyes. There's just something different about them when this happens to him, which Remus has only seen one other time.

"Alright," Remus says softly, "I'm going to get you a glass of water. Stay here for me, yeah?"

"Alright," Sirius replies quietly.

Sighing, Remus stands up to go into the kitchen, making Sirius a glass of water like he said he would. When he comes back, Sirius hasn't moved, and he takes the glass as soon as Remus offers it to him. He drinks it slowly, staring at the screen.

Remus doesn't say anything, just sitting next to Sirius and waiting. He doesn't really know what to do when this happens. The last time, Sirius had been in the middle of sobbing his eyes out, so Remus had held him instinctively. Now, Sirius is, for all intents and purposes, rather calm.

When Sirius drinks his water halfway down, he sits the glass on the table in front of them, then leans back. Glancing over at Remus, he murmurs, "Can I lean on you?"

"Yes," Remus answers immediately, because there is no version of Sirius, or any state Sirius could ever be in, where Remus would deny him this.

Sirius shifts over to lean into Remus' side, lying his head over on his shoulder. Remus wraps his arm around him, but he doesn't do anything else, and won't until Sirius gets back to himself. Sirius breathes, and Remus breathes with him.

It takes a while, but Remus knows as soon as the change occurs. Sirius stiffens, and his breathing immediately goes erratic. He surges up with wide eyes, all the color draining from his face as he whips towards Remus.

"James?" Sirius chokes out.

"He's alive," Remus says quickly, hands darting out to cup Sirius' trembling fingers between both palms. "Sirius, he's alive."

"I need to see," Sirius declares, diving away from Remus to fumble for the remote.

Remus falls silent, letting Sirius do what he needs to do. The screen comes back on to Rita talking

about Juniper, who is surprising everyone by how long she's lived and how well she's doing on her own as a sixteen year old girl.

Sirius just rewinds, not stopping until it gets back to the fight between Mulciber and James. Remus looks away, but he can't do anything to stop himself from hearing it. He closes his eyes, trying to drown it out. Even still, he reaches over and gently bumps his hand into the side of Sirius' leg in offering.

Sirius takes it, threading their fingers together and holding on tight. Knowing that James lives seems to help him get through it, but that doesn't stop him from crying right along with his best friend after Mulciber is dead. Sirius does that rocking thing he does when he can't be still, especially in moments of distress. Remus thinks it soothes him.

He watches all the way through, making quiet noises and murmuring soft words under his breath that Remus knows aren't meant for him, so he respectfully doesn't try to listen to what they might be. Sirius is calmer by the end, and just as he did before, he turns the screen black the moment Rita comes on. There's another round of silence and breathing.

"Reggie isn't doing well," Sirius mumbles, eventually. He's frowning when Remus glances over at him. "He's—you can see it, can't you? He's shutting down. James is… This is hurting him. All of it. They're both so—" He shakes his head, his throat rising and falling on a harsh swallow. "I don't know how they're going to—"

"Sirius," Remus cuts in gently, and Sirius looks over at him, still so pale. "Start small, remember?"

"Right." Sirius takes a deep breath and nods. They've done this once before the previous night when Sirius was stressed, and it seems to help him, so Remus is sticking with it. "Right, so first, they're alive."

"They're alive," Remus agrees, nodding, because that's the first priority. Everything else—that's something to deal with *after* acknowledging the relief that they're alive. That alone always calms Sirius. Helps ground him. It soothes Remus, too.

"They've gotten medicine that will have them healed by morning," Sirius lists off slowly. "They've had bread to eat, so they're not sleeping on empty stomachs. They have water and a way to stay warm. They're safe, for now."

Remus hums. "Yes, they are. You helped them today, Sirius. Don't ignore that. I know you worked hard with the sponsors."

"I wish I didn't need to help them at all," Sirius mumbles. "I got them medicine and food, but that doesn't mean they weren't hurt. That doesn't just go away. I can't—"

"You're right, it doesn't, and it's not fair that they're going through this," Remus agrees, *"but* even just getting what you sent meant something to them. That's important."

Sirius opens his mouth, then closes it, then nods. His eyebrows furrow. "I'm fairly sure that Regulus got my message that I sent with the medicine and bread."

"Can I ask?" Remus murmurs, and Sirius nods. "You just wrote *baby.* I'm not… I don't get it. Am I missing something?"

"I'm really glad that you don't understand, because that means you aren't thinking like *them."* Sirius spits the last word like it's poison, his lip curling. "The fucking Hallows are loving James and Regulus' little romantic moments, which I can't even *begin* to explain how fucked that is on so many levels. Regulus called James *baby,* which…" He pauses, then wrinkles his nose and clears his throat. "Well, I'm quite sure it just slipped out because he was panicking about James being hurt, because he would never be so soppy in front of the entire world on purpose like that. Maybe in private, but… Well, that's it, unless he's freaking out, apparently."

"Can't blame him there," Remus muses.

"No? Not one for pet names?" Sirius asks curiously.

Remus shrugs one shoulder. "Generally, no. I had one boyfriend call me *sunshine* and, unfortunately, *Re-Re ."*

"Re-Re," Sirius repeats flatly, one eyebrow arching up with so much judgement and sass packed into that one twitch of muscle that Remus laughs.

"Yes. Awful, isn't it?" Remus asks.

Sirius purses his lips like he's tasting something sour. "It's more than just awful, Remus. That's a crime against nature. *Re-Re?"* He scoffs, his face scrunching up. "And you still dated him after that? Willingly?"

"He sucked cock *quite* well," Remus says dryly, "so yes, I was willing to take the bad with the good, as it were."

"Oh, *did* he?" Sirius sniffs primly. "Have some standards, why don't you?"

Remus bites back a smile. "It was a short relationship anyway. So, I'm gathering that you don't like pet names."

"No, I do," Sirius replies, relaxing now that they're no longer referencing Remus' past boyfriends. He breaks out into a soft smile. "I'm a lot like James that way, I suppose. Did you see how happy he was about it? Regulus calling him that, I mean. Even in all that pain, he was ecstatic. He's pathetic."

"A bit, yeah," Remus says softly, amused by how fond Sirius currently sounds. "He's really quite smitten, isn't he?"

Sirius sighs, his smile fading. "Yeah, he is."

Remus nods. "Right, so—sending that word."

"Oh! Yeah, that," Sirius says, back on track. "Basically I just told Regulus that they'll have more support if they play into the whole love story thing. He looked peeved about it, so I figured he worked out what I meant."

"Can't blame him for that either." Remus frowns and shakes his head. "I would hate it, too. Having to deal with the fact that your worth is measured in how entertaining you can be for others involving something that's personal—and your survival is dependent on that? Oh, I would be *furious."*

"Anyone would," Sirius mutters with a scowl, "but they never care when it's not them."

"It's never them," Remus murmurs, his jaw clenching.

Sirius closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, drawing his hands away from Remus' to scrub his palms up and down his face. He rubs at his eyes, then presses his fingers into his cheeks and moves them around like he's massaging them. He then proceeds to tap both cheeks and roll his jaw, like he's trying to reset himself and work the tension out of his face. Smacking his lips, he drops his hand and opens his eyes.

"Okay, next," Sirius says with a deep exhale. "Evan died."

"Yeah," Remus replies with a frown. His heart gives a pang just thinking about the way Regulus had sobbed when it happened, and he once again breaks out into goosebumps thinking about the short but poignant message Regulus carved into the tree.

"Regulus isn't handling it well," Sirius mumbles. "He's going to *continue* not to handle it well, and I can't fucking blame him. It's—grief. Normal. Human. He should be allowed that, at the very least, but there's no space for it in the arena. If he just shuts down… Remus, I'm worried it'll get him killed."

"Regulus has been doing very well," Remus says. "He's stubborn, like you. As unfair and awful as it is, I don't think he's going to let this stop him from surviving."

"He has to be hurting. He's going to be so—"

"Sirius."

Grimacing, Sirius nods. "Right. Focus on the now. Worry about the later when it's here. One day at a time."

"One day at a time," Remus repeats quietly, because that's really the only way Sirius can handle this, and even that's a struggle for him—which is fair and makes complete sense.

"James was hurt," Sirius continues, a strain in his voice.

"You said he'd be fine by morning."

"He will. They both will. I just—well, I hated seeing him in pain. Either of them. But yes, they will heal. The medicine was very expensive, but it'll work really well. I think they might have scars, but maybe not."

Remus clears his throat. "You…have scars."

"A lot," Sirius confirms without batting an eye.

"So do I," Remus murmurs.

Sirius blinks at him, then says, "I'll show you yours if you show me mine." He frowns. "Wait."

Remus busts out laughing, unable to help it, and Sirius breaks out into a sheepish grin as his cheeks start to glow. Oh, but Remus adores this man. He's silly, yet so smart. Bashful, yet so brash. Kind and kaleidoscopic. Magical and mercurial. Sirius is a mess, like a container that things of all colors and shapes and sizes were overturned into, impossible to sort through it all, and it's so, so lovely. He's just so lovely.

"Well, fumbled that quite nicely, didn't I?" Sirius says with a snort. He reaches out and swats Remus gently on the leg with the back of his hand. "Stop laughing, you prick. You *know* what I was trying to say."

"Something about showing me my scars?" Remus teases.

"Oh, *nevermind,* forget it." Sirius rolls his eyes, lips twitching as he shakes his head. "Anyway, moving on."

Remus sobers instantly. "Right. Next, then?"

"James killed Mulciber," Sirius says, no longer even *close* to smiling, and it's like shadows are passing through his eyes.

"He had no choice," Remus points out.

Sirius nods. "I know that. *He* knows that, but that never makes it any easier, Remus. It's just fucking awful. I know he won't let that stop him, because his motivations are a little different than Regulus'—or, well, actually they're not different at all, but my point is…it's still going to get to him. He's *James.* Worst case scenario, it gets to him so much that he falters next time something goes wrong."

"James is strong, and he's fought hard," Remus says. "When it comes down to it, he's not going to give up. Don't think about what *might* happen, not now. Just focus on what you already know, and what *you* need to do for them."

"Right, well, I have to…" Sirius grimaces. "Tomorrow, I'm going to have to smooth over Regulus' little note he left after Evan died. It's too—defiant. They're not going to like it, and they might hurt him for it."

Remus forces himself not to ball his hands into fists. "Alright, and how do you plan to help?"

"Play up his grief and say that he meant the Hallow was hollow like he was when losing Evan, like he wasn't alone in feeling that way, like they brought him comfort," Sirius replies immediately, because *of course* he has a plan already. He's so, so fucking smart and completely unafraid to use his brilliance to James and Regulus' advantage.

"Okay." Remus nods. "So, James and Regulus are safe. They were hurt, but they've had medicine and food, and they'll be warm through the night. You helped them today, and you're going to help them tomorrow. Everything else—all the worry for what hasn't happened yet—that will just have to wait."

Of course, Remus knows it's not as simple as that. Sirius is going to fret and worry about *everything* regardless, all that has happened and all that could. But breaking things down like this seems to be the only thing that helps, as much as he *can* be helped in this situation.

Sirius has been letting Remus take care of him through this, at least in part. He lets Remus calm him so he can be focused, and he lets Remus comfort him when he returns to watch the games with him, but that's it. After the screen goes off and they've talked, Sirius keeps his distance. He'll occasionally make flirty comments, but that's as far as he'll go when it comes to their…? Whatever this is.

They haven't embraced since the morning before the second day of the games—and frankly, Remus doesn't mind. He knows this is really hard on Sirius; there's too much going on for him to really care about *romance,* of all things.

Remus just worries he's not letting himself be comforted enough. Not letting himself have the things he wants in a form of punishment, or guilt, or both.

Remus doesn't push it. He never pushes it, and he never will. It's a privilege just being with Sirius at all. In a way, Remus is sort of…grateful for the distance they don't cross, because he's painfully aware of the life they'll never get to have together.

It would have been such a lovely life, too.

"Earlier," Sirius says abruptly, "you knew I was—having issues. Did I—what did we—"

"Nothing," Remus assures him. "We just sat together. I made you a glass of water, and you asked if you could lean on me, then did that when I said yes."

Sirius nods, immediately trusting him, and there's no doubt in his expression at all. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me."

"You've done something kind and helpful. It's only polite to share my gratitude."

"Who taught you such manners?" Remus asks, raising his eyebrows at Sirius. "Not your parents, surely."

"Oh, yeah, definitely not." Sirius chuckles. "They cared about manners involving how we presented ourselves, not manners involving being a decent person. No, that honor goes to Effie and Monty. James' parents."

Remus smiles slightly at the admiration in Sirius' voice. He clearly holds James' parents in high

regard. "They adopted you when you moved out, right?"

"Basically," Sirius admits. "But honestly? They looked after me and Reggie a lot when we were children. Hard not to when we were in and out of their house so much. Well, me more than Regulus, generally, but he was around before—" There's a pause, then Sirius sighs. "Anyway, yes, Effie and Monty took me in as soon as I showed up, no questions asked. Effie…"

"She was your mentor."

"Yeah, she was. If not for her, I wouldn't be alive right now, in more ways than one. She and Monty are brilliant parents; I've been wishing they were mine since I was eleven. I can't even imagine what they're going through right now…"

"They sound lovely," Remus murmurs.

Sirius blinks rapidly and clears his throat, glancing over at him with a tight smile. "They are. What about you?"

"What?" Remus asks.

"I just—I feel like we talk about me a lot, but I'm curious about you, too," Sirius mumbles. "Obviously you don't have to tell me, but if you wanted to…"

"My parents?"

"If you want to tell me about them, sure."

Remus takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Yeah, they were brilliant. My mum was a seamstress, which is not the convenience you might think it would be."

"No? Why not?"

"Hope Lupin didn't believe in throwing clothes out, and considering how hard it was to come by

nice, new clothes, I can't really blame her. But she was a bit fanatical about it, if I'm honest. If I got holes or tears in anything, she just sewed them shut. You wouldn't *believe* the amount of patches I had on my clothes at all times. Lily used to say I dressed like a grandpa, but that was because my mum believed in handing clothes down as well, as long as they fit."

"I bet you looked sexy dressing like a grandpa," Sirius teases, and Remus huffs a quiet laugh, shaking his head. "Hope sounds like a practical woman."

"She was," Remus says softly.

Sirius hesitates, clearly debating the question that Remus just *knows* he wants to ask. He apparently decides not to, choosing instead to murmur, "And your dad? What's his name?"

"Lyall Lupin," Remus recites, dropping his gaze. "He was—"

"You don't have to tell me," Sirius offers, when Remus falters.

Remus shakes his head. "No, it's fine. He was, ah, an Auror for our district. Signed up when he was eighteen, just to feed his family. You know they have to be in service for twenty years without being married or having kids, so it's… I mean, he was in love with my mum, but he felt like he had to take care of his family, or they'd starve, so he—he became an Auror and told my mum to live her life without him, because he couldn't really give her much of one as an Auror."

Sirius says nothing. He just watches with keen eyes, visibly giving Remus all his focus.

"But my mother was a very stubborn woman," Remus continues, lips curling up sadly. "She waited for twenty years."

At this, Sirius' eyes go wide. Breathlessly, he asks, "She did?"

"Indeed she did," Remus says, nodding. "She used to tell me how she would flirt with him and try to get him to sneak off and have a secret affair, even though it would get them both killed if they were ever found out."

"And did they?" Sirius presses, a gleam in his eyes that betrays satisfaction and humor at the thought.

Remus sighs. "My dad held strong. Didn't so much as touch her for twenty years. He said he gave up trying to convince her to live a life with someone else about fourteen years in, but he still wouldn't give in. Showing any loyalty to anything other than the Hallow would have gotten them killed. It's funny, though. A week after the twenty years were up, my parents were married, and I came less than a year later."

"That's really sweet," Sirius says softly.

"Suppose it is. In the end, they didn't get as much time together as they spent apart," Remus murmurs. "She died when I was seventeen, only three years before—"

Remus bites off the rest of that sentence, swallowing it, even though it's too bitter. He remembers the day his mother died, sick in bed with Lyall right by her side as they talked about how the life they had together was worth the wait. He remembers three years after, when blood splattered a shirt his mother had sewn for him and he ran with Lily's hand in his, *knowing* he'd never get to go home again.

"Remus?" Sirius asks cautiously.

"Before I ended up here," Remus finishes, which wasn't what he was going to originally say, and by the expression on Sirius' face, he knows it. He doesn't push it, though. "My dad retired when he was fifty, only five years before my mum passed. That's when the new wave of Aurors came in, since most of the others had aged out, like my dad. I was twelve."

"It's always difficult going through that change," Sirius mutters with a grimace. "The new Aurors are usually nothing like the ones before them, and you're already *used* to how things were before they got there, and then suddenly it's on you to adjust to new rules and procedures to avoid getting into trouble? It's utter shit."

"Yeah, pretty bang on," Remus agrees wryly. "The new Aurors weren't… Well, they weren't as lax as the ones before them. They came straight from district two, where they're trained, and you know they're basically just—Hallows. Anyway, my dad was usually a calm, level-headed man. Just—well, imagine a load of new people coming into the job you did for thirty-two years and completely going about it wrong, particularly just to abuse their power. It was…" He runs his tongue over his teeth, then gives Sirius a tight smile. "Let's just say it didn't end well and leave it at that, yeah?"

Sirius is curious. Remus can *tell* that he's curious, and he can't even blame him, but to tell him… For some reason, Remus really doesn't want to. It's nothing good, and Sirius already sees so much of his worst as it is.

Despite his curiosity, Sirius doesn't push any further.

"I'm sorry about your mum," Sirius murmurs. "It's a shame I'll never get to meet her. I think we would have gotten on."

"Oh, yeah, she would have *loved* you," Remus admits with a fond chuckle, lips curling up. "It's a shame I'll never get to meet Monty and Effie."

"They'll know of you, though," Sirius assures him. "I'll be telling them all about you."

"Will you?" Remus asks.

Sirius gives him a lopsided smile, cute and boyish. "They worry about me, so it'll comfort them to know that I had you through all of this. I wish I could tell them now. Your mere existence would help them sleep better at night, I just know it." He chuckles. "Just like it does for me."

Remus melts like butter over an open flame. He's nearly overcome with the urge to reach out and touch Sirius, to hold him, to kiss him. He refrains with effort, turning his head away and taking a deep breath to calm himself.

For the first time in years, Remus' mind turns to his father. All their fights, all their disagreements, all the push and pull of where they couldn't meet halfway on how to act, especially after Hope died. Remus was too—radical, honestly. Defiant. Rebellious. Always in trouble and unafraid to cause more, while Lyall was hard on him for it. These days, Remus knows why, even though he couldn't understand it back then.

This. This is what Lyall was trying to warn him away from. Exactly what happened and exactly where Remus is now. Lyall could see the smoke-signal for what it was, and he knew how bad things could get. He tried to save Remus from this fate, but he hadn't managed to. Remus didn't let him.

They had a fight on that last day. A screaming match, in fact. Lyall ranting and lecturing while Remus shouted and tossed a glass at the wall the moment Lyall dared to bring what Hope would have wanted into it. Their worst fight—and that's the last memory Remus ever has with his dad.

Remus can just imagine what it was like for Lyall when he heard the news. When he found out that his son—his *son*—

Swallowing thickly, Remus pushes the thoughts away. There's a reason he doesn't think about it, mostly because it hurts to. He can't go to his dad now and tell him that, even if he *still* doesn't agree, he understands what Lyall was trying to do. And he's grateful. All Lyall ever wanted to do was protect his son, and Remus… Well, Remus had his own way of doing things. Look where that's gotten him.

There's something else Remus understands now that he never could before. Being chained to the Hallow and being so very aware that one mistake could end in death, or worse. The only difference is, Lyall had to deal with it for twenty years, and Remus is sentenced to life.

It's some kind of cruel irony that Remus would find himself in a situation like his parents, but unlike them, he and Sirius will never get their happy ending, even as brief as it was.

Remus glances over at Sirius and smiles slightly, because if there's one thing that Hope and Lyall taught him about love, it's that a happy middle is just as special.

Gently, Sirius smiles back.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who want warnings and need to know where to skip:

IF YOU WISH TO SKIP THE GRAPHIC VIOLENCE/DEATH, THEN JUST SCROLL PAST WHERE JAMES THROWS THE HATCET AT MULCIBER UNTIL IT'S REGULUS' POV AGAIN (after it says "Regulus" three times)

if you just want the summary/warning: mulciber does find james in the cave. mulciber taunts james, and he makes a comment about killing regulus slowly, which spurs james to throw his hatchet at him. mulciber manages to block it, but james tackles him. they get into a rather brutal fight, in which it's described that mulciber kicks james in his injured leg multiple times, as well as shoves the hatchet down into james' chest, but only a bit—only to break the skin, really. they hit each other and fight, and mulciber lies to james to say that regulus is dead. james ends up managing to fight him

off, hitting him until he swings the hatchet into his chest multiple times, even after mulciber is dead. it's really quite brutal and described in detail.

as for the dissociative amnesia: it's sirius again, but it's from remus' POV, so it's not really described in detail. it's fairly brief, sirius is rather calm this time, and remus takes care of sirius until he comes back to himself.

for everyone else, who has finished the chapter...

yeah, that was another rough one. i think, for me, this was the second most uncomfortable chapter for me to write—or at least the first portion of it. the one that was most uncomfortable for me to write hasn't been posted yet.

i will say that things do calm down for a bit. like, we do get a break and the chance to breathe from here, at least for a few chapters. things don't get really, really bad again until chapter 20, if that helps.

so, let's get into it, i guess.

i don't really have much to say about james and regulus right now. like, they're clearly going through it, both of them. it's just a really bad time for them, very heavy and very hard. they had that moment of comfort in all the hurt when they were using the medicine that sirius sent, at least (hurt/comfort my beloved <3).

oh, and i feel like i should mention—im kinda going on the HP Universe/Wizarding World rules for advancements in medicine as far as what the Hallows have access to, so like. yes, that salve will heal them and leave only minor scars, if that, because i said so. it was REALLY expensive, though, so just know sirius put in the work for that! put some respect on his name!!!

oh! i can say this about jegulus, at least. regulus is so transparent at this point that, if not for everything going on and all that he's dealing with otherwise, he would 100% realize that he—at the very least—cares about james. however, shit isn't simple or going well for him, so he literally does not have the space or time or emotional well-being to examine his feelings.

but anyway, the real main characters of this chapter were none other than remus and sirius. finally, they're BACK. oh, ive missed them. we see plenty of them over the next two chapters, i promise, and it's GOOD, too. im very excited.

im particularly excited for the next chapter, honestly, for multiple reasons, but we get there when we get there.

anyway, back to sirius and remus. they're so cute and sad, i wanna BITE THEM! and also hug them. like, sirius is obviously going THROUGH it, but remus makes it better.

i think the best part of this chapter was sirius "ill show you yours if you show me mine" black and remus "oh, is that so?" lupin just—having soft/light moments together. jealous sirius black strikes again. he was so offended by "Re-Re" 😭😭😭 PLS HE WAS SO UPSET LMAOOO i adore him. also, them opening up about their parents>>>

we got more hints of remus' history, which was exciting. the auror thing is basically what the peacekeepers were in the hunger games books/movies, but for those of you

who havent read/watched or just don't remember, ill give a brief summary, short and sweet.

basically, they're people from the districts—usually district two, but can come from anywhere—that are trained like civilian soldiers to keep order in the districts and provide protection in the Hallow. they're completely under the Hallows orders, and they're the ones who capture criminals and keep the districts in line. depending on the district, they can be relaxed, or they can be strict. oh, and it was aurors that killed fabian and gideon on riddle's orders. we will get a bit more information on that later, i promise!

anyway, i think that about sums everything up, so let me wrap up.

numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

UPDATING ON THURSDAY (around the normal time that time, i promise)

see everyone on thursday <3

The Break

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!! finally, an easier chapter! im so stupidly excited about this one, you all have no idea.

warnings for this chapter:

-references to death/murder (because of the whole arena thing AND the whole corrupt government thing)
-references to previous deaths/violence
-brief depiction of violence (VERY brief)
-brief description of animal death (to eat in the arena and not described in detail)

i will be putting a short in-depth warning in the end notes for the brief violence in this chapter. it's not as bad as we've seen so far, but it's there just in case anyone wants/needs it, which is, as always, valid!!!

okay, without further ado, ENJOY :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sybill likes to cut holes in her shirts and put paper clips through them because she thinks it gives her *flair,* which Lily isn't against, per se. It's not that she protests individuality and style—no, of course not—but she *does* take issue with Sybill doing things that's going to end with her crying later.

"How are you even hiding that from Dumbledore?" Lily asks as she tugs on the line of clips. She's reaching for a cigarette with her other hand, which Sybill looks at pointedly. "Oh, this isn't nearly as obvious. I have a place to hide these."

Sybill squints at her, and Lily reaches up to scoop her arm under her chest, fumbling for the pack of cigarettes before she tucks it underneath. When she lets go, the pack disappears beneath. Sybill looks down at her own chest, frowning, then looks back up with a thoughtful look on her face. "Will you—"

"No, I will not use my tits to hide things for you," Lily cuts in, tugging the pack out so she can scoop her lighter from it, cigarette trapped between her lips.

"Not all of us were blessed with—" Sybill drops her gaze and bites her lip. "Goodness, Lily."

"Blessed?" Lily mutters. "You think back pain, uncomfortable fitting clothes, and common heat rashes is *blessed?"*

"No, you're right, that's awful. Still, you have extra hiding spots, and also…it sure is a blessing to look at them," Sybill says with a dreamy sigh, then promptly folds over and rests her head on Lily's chest with a happy hum.

Lily quickly grabs her cigarette so it won't catch Sybill's hair on fire, her free hand cupping Sybill's head as she grumbles, "Oi, watch it. I'm smoking, Sybill."

"Yeah, yeah, I know your routine by now. Same way Wren, Miranda, and Ember know," Sybill tells her with a snort. She lifts her head and shifts across the grass, throwing her leg over Lily's lap and leaning up to pluck the cigarette from Lily's mouth, turning it to put it in her own. Inhaling, her cheeks hollow out, and she parts her lips to let the smoke escape slowly. "Let Lily Evans fuck you, then watch her chainsmoke like she's trying to set her lungs on fire."

"Well, if you know, then what makes you think I'm willing to share?" Lily reaches out to take her cigarette back, raising her eyebrows. "These aren't easy to come by, let me tell you."

"And yet, I've never seen you without them after we fuck. Wren, Ember, and Miranda all say the same."

"Stop talking to the other women I fuck. It's weird."

Sybill grins. "Stop fucking so many women."

"Can't do that. You'd all be so disappointed," Lily teases, then inhales and tips her head back to watch the smoke billow up from her lips. Her eyes flutter shut for a brief moment.

"That we would," Sybill agrees with a chuckle. "Besides, it's not like the Phoenix has enough room to keep us unaware of it. Fuck, Lily, we all eat meals together. Wren is literally my best friend. What did you expect to happen?"

Lily doesn't bother responding to that. If she's honest, she doesn't really give a shit. "You never answered me." Reaching out with her free hand, she tugs on the paper clips. "How are you getting those past Dumbledore?"

"I stole them from his office," Sybill says. "If he acknowledges them, then he has to acknowledge that someone managed to break into his office."

"You broke into his office?" Lily asks sharply, sitting up so quickly that Sybill nearly topples out of her lap.

"Yeah, I did," Sybill admits, looking smug. "Difficult to do, if I'm honest, but worth it for the paper clips. Of course, he'll probably just have someone confiscate them, and I'll end up sobbing again. But, you know, it's worth it."

"They look lovely," Lily feels compelled to point out, if only to make Sybill happier. Sybill brightens instantly. "How did you do it? Break into his office, I mean."

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Trelawney."

"Evans," Sybill teases, but Lily stares at her, staring her down, and Sybill's smile fades. She swallows. "I snuck out after curfew. Remember that alarm that went off in the Great Hall last night? That was me."

"Did you look at anything else?" Lily asks, and Sybill hesitates, biting her lip. Lily nods. "You did. Tell me."

Sybill frowns. "Lily—"

"Tell me," Lily repeats sternly.

"I—" Sybill grimaces, then huffs and scoots out of Lily's lap, drawing her legs up to her chest, where she wraps her arms around her knees. "It wasn't much, alright? I didn't want to risk too much, so I took a look at the most recent file."

"What is it?" Lily grits out.

"The Prewetts," Sybill murmurs. "Fabian and Gideon. They're dead. Killed on orders from Riddle."

Lily takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Dorcas?"

"Still alive," Sybill says.

"Well," Lily replies, and that's as far as she gets.

Neither of them speak for a long time. Lily keeps smoking, ignoring the faint tremble to her fingers as she looks up at the treetops above them. It's a nice meadow, because Lily likes a decent setting to fuck in, and the inside of the Phoenix leaves much to be desired. A whole lot of grey, mostly.

An underground bunker called the Phoenix should be a bit less drab, in her opinion, but this has been her reality for the last five years. Metal walls and too many rules. Not much more than a prison, really, if you sit down and think about it—and Lily sits down and thinks about it *a lot.*

The Order—those living in the Phoenix—consists of a lot of good people, at least. Most of them have been living this way their whole lives, unaware of the world outside. When you haven't had a taste of fresh air, you don't feel like you're suffocating underground, Lily has learned. She remembers the look on Sybill's face the first time Lily coaxed her outside with honey-coated words and heated promises in her soft touches.

Lily, who has had a taste of fresh air, constantly feels like she's suffocating inside the Phoenix. She feels trapped more often than she doesn't. It makes her itchy.

"Evans," comes the call from Kingsley through the radio.

"Fuck's sake," Lily snaps, sucking down the last bit of her cigarette before stubbing it out and diving for the radio with a scowl. "King, I've had *one* smoke."

"Not my problem, Red," Kingsley responds in amusement. "I'm supposed to be retrieving you from

your room."

"What? Why?"

"You have two minutes."

"Shit," Lily blurts out, launching hastily to her feet as Sybill looks up at her with wide eyes. Lily holds her hand out, wiggling her fingers. "Come on, Sybill, time to go."

Sybill looks fit for crying. "Lily, if—if they find out—"

"They won't find out," Lily insists. "Well, they won't if you get a move on."

Groaning, Sybill takes Lily's hand and lets her tug her to her feet, complaining under her breath as Lily snatches her into a run. She's grumbling breathlessly about how she lets pretty, mysterious girls get her into trouble, as if she's not fully capable of getting into trouble on her own. She broke into *Dumbledore's office.* Really, she's Lily's favorite of all the women she's been with for that alone.

Lily admittedly enjoys the thrill of running to get back into the Phoenix, especially pushing a time limit. The severe lack of excitement in her life in the last five years makes it impossible *not* to enjoy this, honestly. She's grinning by the time she comes tumbling out of the hatch through the air vent in her room, Sybill right behind her.

First, Lily slots the vent cover back into place, then she dives for her pillow to dig into the pillowcase and find the small, near-invisible tear that she pushes her pack of cigarettes into. She smooths her pillow out, then sits down and grabs Sybill's wrist to drag her close in between her legs. Sybill looks startled, but she melts the moment Lily pulls her into a kiss.

Right on time, there's a knock on the door, only a brief warning before it swings open. Lily and Sybill break apart to stare at Kinglsey, Poppy, and Bones.

"And what if we were naked?" Lily declares immediately, glaring out at them.

Kingsley looks amused, but he turns away at the same time that an exasperated Poppy Pomfrey and a scowling Edgar Bones do. Bones would be scowling, though. Lily used to have a *thing* with his sister, Amelia, which didn't end well, so seeing her with Sybill likely irritates him.

"Ms. Evans, your recreational time is set between nine and eleven am," Poppy says with a sigh.

"Ms. Pomfrey, two hours simply aren't enough for all the…recreational things I get up to," Lily replies, smiling at Sybill, who chokes on a laugh that she pretends is a cough.

Bones scoffs and mutters, "If you're done working your way through half the Phoenix—"

"I wasn't, actually," Lily cuts in, "but I've made *quite* the progress. Don't sound so bitter, Bones. I'd give you advice on how to satisfy a woman, if you need it, and I'm a reliable source. Just ask your sister."

"Alright," Kingsley says smoothly, catching Bones when he starts to whip around. He holds him straight and looks over at Lily like *can you please behave?* "Sybill, if you would return to your room, please."

"Sure thing, King," Sybill replies eagerly, beaming at him.

Kingsley's smile turns gentle and warm as Sybill passes him. She has her arms wrapped around herself, blocking the paper clips on her shirt, and she wastes no time in beating a hasty retreat. Kingsley watches her go for a moment, and Lily is quite sure that he did see the clips, but he says nothing as he turns to focus on her again.

"Follow us," Kingsley murmurs.

Lily heaves a sigh, as if she's not burning with curiosity at the moment. "Yeah, alright. Where are we going?"

No one answers her as they lead her away, and she crosses her arms as they head through the compound. Curiously, they're not leading her towards the infirmary, where she works the mid shift from three pm until one am, replacing Arthur Weasley, who works from four am to three pm. They're both on call from one am to four am, and so are those that work on the shifts with them—assistants, mostly, because Arthur and Lily are two of the few healers the Phoenix has. There's

Poppy, the leader of the infirmary, but she's also a field medic and has other responsibilities as well.

Lily's agitation with not being told anything melts away into genuine trepidation when she realizes that they're leading her to Dumbledore's office. She drops her arms and stands up straighter, sharing a brief look with Kingsley, who holds her gaze until he reaches the door. He knocks three times with the heavy gargoyle-shaped knocker, and they all wait for a calm response granting them entry before they go in.

Immediately, Lily's eyes find the screen that's on the side wall. She only gets to watch the games while in the infirmary, because there's a screen there for the patients, which would usually be playing old films, but the only thing broadcasting on any screen during the games *are* the games.

On the screen are James Potter and Regulus Black. They're getting ready to leave the cave they settled into the previous night, neither of them speaking or looking at each other.

"Ms. Evans," Dumbledore greets, dragging Lily's attention to him. "Thank you for joining me. Have a seat."

"We interrupted her with Sybill Trelawney," Bones announces, sounding as if he's relishing in doing so.

"Ah," Dumbledore says, then hums. "Yes, thank you, Mr. Bones. I'd ask that you, Mr. Shacklebolt, and Ms. Pomfrey leave Ms. Evans and I alone."

Lily struggles not to fidget as the others file out, shutting the door behind them as they go. She's never been alone with Dumbledore, not even when she first arrived five years ago. He did visit her in the infirmary while she was healing, but there were people in the beds, so they weren't technically *alone.*

Albus Dumbledore is an older man—much older—with a long white beard and long white hair, and he wears half-moon glasses perched on his crooked nose. He's a man admired by many—calm and steady when addressing his people, even kind when requiring order within the Order. As the leader, he's the one everyone looks to for anything, and he's the one everyone respects and believes in. He holds the promise of one day winning the war for freedom, or so it's said.

So far, Lily hasn't seen much of this so-called *'war'.* Whatever war is taking place, it's fairly damn

quiet. Dumbledore has been in power a long time, from what Lily knows. Around fifty years, at the very least, and he's pushing eighty at seventy-four.

It shows. Not because of his hair, or because of his wrinkled, withered hands, or the aged softness of his voice—no, it's the gleam of knowledge in his eyes. They're wise. This is a man who knows things, who knows more than anyone else, who knows what no one has even dared to begin thinking about yet. Knowledge like that—it's dangerous. It's deadly.

"What do you think?" Dumbledore murmurs, turning slightly to incline his head towards the screen.

Lily flicks her gaze to it. Regulus Black is crouched down beside the pond, refilling his water. James Potter is watching him from a few steps away, hatchet in hand. They're both still not speaking, and they've healed really well, all visible wounds just thin lines that likely won't even scar.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Lily admits, ripping her gaze away to focus on Dumbledore again.

Dumbledore is silent for a beat, then he says, "Do you have an opinion on who will win?"

Lily frowns, her eyebrows tugging together as she stares at him. One thing she's always appreciated about the Order is the way the games are treated; they're seen as barbaric and utterly immoral, something that needs to be stopped at all costs, and *not* a form of entertainment to be speculated about. No one's asked her for her opinion on the games in five years, which she actually *likes,* so the fact that he is now makes her…uncomfortable, honestly.

"Um," Lily mumbles, clearing her throat. He keeps waiting, so she actually thinks about it, and it doesn't take her very long to form her honest answer. "Regulus Black."

"Hm. Regulus Black," Dumbledore says softly, tapping his finger to the desk as he looks at the screen. "Why?"

"Why do I think he'll win?"

"Yes."

Lily glances at the screen again, still frowning. "Well, he's undeniably skilled and willing to do what it takes to survive. He's smart, and he has James Potter with him, who is also a strong fighter and incredibly smart."

"Why not James Potter?" Dumbledore asks, looking at her, and Lily blinks. "Why don't you think he will win?"

"I—" Lily opens and closes her mouth, because she doesn't know. She doesn't have the answer.

"Love," Dumbledore murmurs. "It's because of love. Even unconsciously, love has its influence, Ms. Evans."

"I'm—I don't understand," Lily admits, which frustrates her. She doesn't like feeling stupid, or out of the loop.

Dumbledore's beard twitches with his smile. "Some would say that sacrifice is the strongest form of love. Do you agree?"

Against her will, Lily's mind turns to Remus. It hurts to think about him, as always, and a lump forms in her throat when she remembers his sacrifice. Him for her. His capture for her freedom, and here she is, locked away in an underground bunker while doing *nothing* with what he sacrificed himself for. They caught him, and they killed him for his crimes. Her crimes, too, but she got away. He made sure she did, and she sometimes wonders for *what?* For this? He's dead, and she's just sitting here, wasting the life he granted her.

"Yes, I agree," Lily rasps.

"James Potter has made his feelings for Regulus Black very clear," Dumbledore announces calmly. "So, that begs the question—one most don't dare to ask themselves. If, at the end, it is just them, who will win? But you have your answer before you even ask, don't you? Regulus Black will win, because James Potter will ensure it. Why?"

"Love," Lily whispers. "Sacrifice."

"And you knew this before you even thought to work out *why* you knew it," Dumbledore says. "We all know it, because to be human is to know love. That is how strong love is. It causes a sense of faith. Hope." He holds her gaze. "Power."

Lily swallows. "So, Regulus Black will win because of love."

"Yes," Dumbledore confirms simply. "Do you want to know the most devastating thing in this world is? The most destructive thing? It's not fear. It's not war. It's not pain, or loss, or fury. It's not even death."

"Then what is it?"

"It's love."

"Love," Lily repeats quietly.

Dumbledore hums. "The most powerful thing in this world is *love."* He glances back at the screen. "People will kill for it. People will die for it. But, most importantly, people will *fight* for it. Love is a dangerous, dangerous weapon if one knows how to wield it."

"And you do, I'm guessing," Lily declares boldly.

"I do," Dumbledore agrees without shame, focusing back on her again, and something passes in his eyes like a shadow that sends a chill down her spine. "Love is how I will win a war."

Lily presses her lips into a thin line. "How do you plan to do that, exactly?"

"You let me worry about that," Dumbledore replies without batting an eye. He turns and gently threads his hands together on the desk, focusing on her. "Do you know why I called you here today, Ms. Evans?"

"No," Lily grits out.

"Because you don't love anything," Dumbledore says, and she briefly stops breathing. "Everything you loved was taken from you. Your mother, father, sister, and best friend were all killed. You drift between your lovers here, but none of them matter to you, not really. You have friends here, but you don't let yourself be close to them, not genuinely. Five years, and you've refrained from forming one meaningful connection here, which I must assume is a conscious choice you've made. You love nothing, because you've decided not to."

Lily feels his words like a tiny slice into her skin, each one cutting deeper and deeper. She remains stiff in her seat, her whole body cold and a gaping emptiness in her chest. The reminder of her family, what they suffered because she got away, will forever set her heart on fire. *Mum, Dad, Petunia.* They suffered for her crimes, and sometimes she wonders how she lives with that knowledge every day.

"Love gives us purpose," Dumbledore murmurs, never breaking her gaze. It feels like he's looking through her, right down to her fucking soul. "It gives us *all* purpose, but without love, what is your purpose?"

"I don't know," Lily croaks.

"In this war, love is a weapon that will be wielded by all sides. Do you know how important it is to have soldiers that are immune?" Dumbledore asks.

"To love?" Lily asks sharply.

"To the destructive nature of love. I can win a war with that, and I can just as easily lose it *because* of that, so those that are unaffected by it are invaluable to me." Dumbledore inclines his head towards her. "You have nothing. No one to care about, no one to love, and no one to lose."

Lily works her jaw, balling her fists in her lap as she blinks harshly to try escaping the way her eyes sting. Dumbledore doesn't apologize, and she doesn't expect him to. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing you're not willing to give," Dumbledore informs her, leaning back in his chair. "I want to start training you to be a field medic. It will be some time yet before you find yourself in the field, because we have some time yet before the war makes itself known. It's coming, Ms. Evans, and when it does, I want you to be fighting on the front lines. Does that entice you?"

"Yes," Lily says instantly, almost gasping the word out in pure relief, because finally, *finally,* she

won't be wasting Remus' sacrifice or the loss of her family. "I'll do it. I want to do it."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkle. "Yes, I thought you might respond like this, if for no other reason than because you're tired of escaping through the vents to go outside."

Lily freezes, feeling a sense of dread crawl through her. He knows. He *knows* that she's been going to the surface, and *how* she's been getting out. She could be put in solitary for that.

"I believe that will be all for now, Ms. Evans. We'll begin with you soon," Dumbledore says. "You're excused."

Lily's never left a room so fast in her *life.*

~•~

The games are a delicate balance. Sirius has always known that from the moment he became a mentor, because having an insight to what goes on behind the scenes taught him that. Most people assume it's like a machine made of steel, completely indestructible with no broken parts.

In all actuality, it's a web carefully weaved, made of gossamer material that could so easily fall apart. But that's the thing; you don't want it to fall apart, because if it does, people die.

"Eleven left now," Frank says, watching Irene and Mathias check the traps outside of the cave they're at with a furrow in his brow. They're his tributes, so of course he's concerned about any and all moves they make.

"And it's only day four," Emmeline murmurs, shaking her head. Juniper is still sleeping in the ground—and okay, Sirius *has* to ask, at this point.

"Did you teach Juniper to dig holes and hide in them?" Sirius blurts out, because he's genuinely curious.

Emmeline glances over at him, arching an eyebrow. "Actually, she came up with it on her own. Evan—" She halts, her throat bobbing, and Sirius' heart gives a pang because he doesn't doubt

Evan's death hit her hard, too. In fact, Evan's death seems to have hit *a lot* of people hard, including Hallows, shockingly enough. "Well, he used to say something about climbing. No one ever thinks to look up, he always said, and one day, Juniper made the comment that no one ever thinks to look *down* either. Suppose she was right, in the end."

"Em," Frank says gently.

"Yeah, I know," Emmeline murmurs, despite the fact that Frank hasn't said anything. He doesn't have to. They all say the same things every year when they lose their tributes. She looks at Sirius steadily. "I just—I want to say that what your brother did for him was—it was appreciated. Stupid, yes, but it meant a lot to me, and I know I'm not the only one."

Sirius just nods, because he can't really say anything else. She's not thanking him, really, but she knows as much as he does how important it is to say these things to each other. When things really matter, leaving them unsaid in the moment often means they'll go unspoken forever, because there's always something else that happens next.

"How are mine doing?" Marlene asks, walking over with a glass in hand, which Sirius side-eyes in vague concern.

"Vanity is up and working on the bridge with Peter," Frank informs her, "and Hodge has set out with the death eaters. They're out for blood, predictably."

"Your blood," Emmeline mutters, nudging Sirius with her elbow. She grimaces apologetically when he shoots her a glare.

"That was brutal last night," Marlene says quietly, briefly pressing her shoulder into Sirius'. "With Mulciber, I mean. Evan, too. Sorry, Em."

"Thank you," Emmeline replies, equally quiet.

Sirius takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out. "Well, on the bright side, James and Regulus are all healed up, so that's…" He swallows, then clears his throat. "Anyway, Lucius is out of line-up now that Avery and Mulciber are dead."

"And it's yours that killed them," Frank points out. He shoots him a curious look. "Malfoy will take

that personally."

"I don't much care, honestly," Sirius says. "Let him. I'll rip his fucking head off if he tries anything."

Marlene snorts. "So much for family loyalty, even extended as it is."

"He's no family of mine," Sirius declares. "I don't give a toss if my cousin married him; I have *no* relation to that prick. It's no less than he deserves, in any case. I don't doubt he encouraged Avery and Mulciber to hunt down Regulus and James."

Emmeline gives a mean little smile. "Didn't work out so well for him, did it?"

"He's still here, though," Frank grumbles, inclining his head across the room where Lucius is talking to Dolohov and Yaxley, both who still have death eaters alive.

Sirius eyes him across the room in disdain, a bitter taste in the back of his throat that makes swallowing difficult. Most mentors stop showing up to watch when their tributes die, as do many sponsors that were planning to support those tributes and those alone, no one else, completely unwilling to support any other after they're dead. At least a third of the sponsors have ceased to show, now that Mulciber is out. A lot of people expected him to win, and maybe if James and Regulus weren't his competitors, he would have.

It's a bit fucked up for Sirius to feel satisfaction about that, even a bit of *pride,* but it's there anyway. He knows that's sick, in a way, because no part of him wants Regulus and James to have to suffer as they have. It's just that Lucius is a cruel bastard who brings home Victors more often than anyone else. One of his tributes doesn't win *every* year, but it's still a high rate. Lucius has been a mentor since before Sirius was even a tribute himself, but only by a few years. He won his games seven years before Sirius won his.

Lucius is the type of man who relishes in the games, always a mentor of death eaters. He's also the man that Narcissa ran off to marry when she left the district with Bellatrix in tow. There is absolutely no warmth between him and Sirius.

"Sirius," Marlene says, nudging him and nodding at the screen, which gains him immediate focus.

James and Regulus are moving through the forest in complete silence. They're going a bit slow because James has a mild limp, which will no doubt clear up by tomorrow. They haven't spoken one word to each other or looked at each other since waking up. Regulus looks blank, and James looks so fucking *sad.* Sirius wants to hold them both, just wrap them up in his arms and promise them that they're going to be okay, even when that's not a promise he can really keep.

He can track their position on the full map layout in the corner of the screen, and whether they know it or not, they're heading in the direction of the cave where Peter, Vanity, Mathias, and Irene are. If they keep going, they might reach it by tomorrow, so long as there are no interruptions.

Thankfully, the death eaters have no idea what their location is, and they're going in the opposite direction. The arena is one big loop, however, so they'd all eventually run into each other at some point. Maybe not today, though.

The games are a delicate balance, as established, and that comes with the knowledge that the gamemakers have their thumbs on each and every pulse in that arena. Every choice reflects that, and they decide what tribute may or may not have a bad day. They also decide what tribute needs a break.

Sometimes, if they push too hard, they'll end up pushing too far. Survival instincts are far more fragile than most people realize, and under too much strain, they *will* snap. Being consistently tormented can completely ruin the goal that the gamemakers are always striving for—make an entertaining game. It's not fun when the players are too broken to play.

So, it seems that Regulus and James are getting the space to breathe, because not being *allowed* to breathe will eventually suffocate them, regardless of their skills and motivations.

Unfortunately, James and Regulus are not taking this time to do anything entertaining. There's no flirting. No teasing, or talking, or touching. No stolen glances or further planning. There's absolutely nothing, and Sirius can't blame them. They have to be fucking exhausted; not only are they dealing with everything they've been through and had to do so far, but they still have to constantly think about surviving in the present. They have grief and pain and anger to deal with, along with basic survival needs like water and food.

With everything they're dealing with, that doesn't leave much room for their little love story that everyone is so eager to see.

"Day four," Frank announces with a deep breath. "Let's see how it goes, yeah? Good luck."

"It's going to be a long fucking day," Emmeline says with a world-weary sigh, and then they all split off at once.

While James and Regulus get their much needed break, as brief as it may be, Sirius goes to work.

~•~

Dorcas looks up from her cup when she hears the knock at her door. Frowning, she dips the teabag a few more times before gently lifting it out and sitting it on the small plate her teacup is resting on. She draws her robe around her and gives a quick glance towards the screen on her way to the door.

Regulus and James haven't had much happen to them so far, but it's only mid-day, so that's subject to change at a moment's notice. Regulus has flung out one of his daggers to catch a bunny as it darted past, which he and James did stop to eat, and James didn't even protest or make one comment. He just sat down against a tree with his head ducked while Regulus handled the whole process. They haven't been speaking.

Dorcas wonders how Sirius is doing today, after the previous night. She's tempted to go check on him, but the thought of leaving her place right now is—too much. After learning about Gideon and Fabian, she left her suite and came home instead, which isn't uncommon for those that aren't mentors to do. Most design teams and handlers go home to watch the games at their own leisure, or with their family.

Dorcas will go back. She plans to; she just needs a little more time. As much as she wants to be there for Sirius, and for Marlene, she has this horrible knowledge she's carrying that she can't tell anyone, and she's working out how to handle it.

Sighing, Dorcas checks the belt on her robe one more time, making sure it's tied tight, then opens her door. On the other side is a short, curvy woman with red hair and startlingly bright blue eyes. She's a Hallow, just from the way she's dressed, and her hair is cut into a wavy bob.

"Dorcas Meadowes?" the woman asks.

"Can I help you?" Dorcas replies, eyebrows furrowed.

The woman tilts her chin up. "My name is Molly Prewett. You know my brothers, Fabian and Gideon. They work with you."

Shit, Dorcas thinks.

"Yes," Dorcas says softly. "Right, Molly, they mentioned you. It's lovely to meet you. Would you like to come in? I'm having tea, if you'd like to join me."

"Please," Molly replies with a fierce gleam in her eye that makes her polite request seem more like an order.

Dorcas smiles as warmly as possible and steps back to let Molly in, then takes the lead towards the kitchen. Her back turned to Molly, she lets her face twist through various emotions, then wrangles them all as much as she can. When they reach the kitchen, Dorcas immediately starts making Molly her tea, pouring out the boiling water and slipping the teabag inside before carrying it over.

"Sugar's just here," Dorcas murmurs, gesturing to the artistic tin holding the sugar cubes with a small pair of tongs to use to put them in their tea.

"Thank you," Molly says, and yet again, she speaks in a would-be polite way, except her gaze is sharp on Dorcas' face as she adds some sugar to her tea.

Dorcas is admittedly uneasy at the moment. "Like I said, it's lovely to meet you, Molly. Fabian and Gideon only had nice things to say about you. I should tell you, your brothers were incredibly talented, and I enjoyed working with them."

"Yes, they've always been very good at what they do." Molly frowns slightly, swallowing harshly, and then she looks down at her tea as she stirs it. There's a furrow between her brows, and her fingers are shaking, making the spoon clink against the ceramic. "They've always admired you, Ms. Meadowes."

"Dorcas, please," Dorcas mumbles, trying to ignore the lump that forms in her throat.

Molly looks up, holding her gaze. "They've always admired you, Dorcas, and your work. When

they found out that they'd be working with you, they were…" Her face softens for the very first time, and she smiles. "They were *ecstatic.* Wouldn't shut up about it, really. It was their dream, you know."

"I admired them just as much," Dorcas tells her, and it's true. It's so true. Such brave, brave men. "They taught me more than I could ever explain."

"You're close to them, then?"

"I did get close to them, yes. I was their friend."

"Have you heard from them at all?" Molly asks.

Dorcas stirs her own tea with a frown, feigning thoughtfulness while Molly watches her. "You know, I can't say that I have. It's a shame. I'm assuming they went home when the—"

"They didn't," Molly interrupts sharply, taking her spoon out and sitting it down with a clink. She doesn't drink her tea; no, she braces her hands on the counter and stares Dorcas right in her eyes. "For one thing, they *wouldn't.* They would see their job through until the end. Gid and Fab always did. But I did check, just to be sure, and they didn't go home."

"Oh," Dorcas says, nodding. "Well, maybe we just haven't crossed paths, that's all. I've been home recently, so—"

Molly cocks her head, her eyes cold. "But that doesn't make any sense, Dorcas. I know which tributes Fabian and Gideon worked with, because they talked about them to me, and you've surely seen how rough those tributes have it in the games. I know it's hard to watch. Fab and Gid would reach out to check on you, at least, especially if you're their *friend."*

"I've been really busy," Dorcas murmurs calmly, lifting her tea to take a careful sip, trying to calm her racing heart and the pain that twists in her chest.

"Gideon and Fabian have been missing for *four days,"* Molly announces harshly, her voice a low hiss. Her whole body is shaking, and there are tears forming in her eyes. "Four days, Dorcas, and I haven't heard a word from them. *No one* has heard from them. You are, as far as I know, the last person who interacted with them."

"That may be so, but I don't have the answers," Dorcas replies stiffly, inwardly *begging* her to just let it go.

"Gideon left me a voicemail," Molly informs her, reaching in her pocket to pull out her cell. She sits it on the counter and holds Dorcas' gaze as she plays it.

"Hi, Molly," Gideon's voice filters through, and just hearing it feels like a blow to Dorcas' chest. *"I know the games are about to start soon, so you've got your cell off, but I just…"* There's a long beat of silence, just the sound of his breathing, and then he clears his throat. *"I just wanted to ring you up to check in and tell you I love you. Fabian and I—we love you, Molly."*

Dorcas feels like her heart is lodged the wrong way in her chest, all mashed up. He knew. Gideon *knew;* or, he suspected, at least. She can't work out where it went wrong, or why Riddle ordered the hit, but Gideon somehow saw it coming. That only makes it more tragic.

Dorcas takes another sip of her tea for the excuse to clear her throat, working to keep her expression neutral. "That's lovely. I'm not sure what you're implying—"

"Don't *lie* to me!" Molly bursts out, slamming her hand down on the counter so hard that the teacups rattle. Her eyes are full of tears and fury. "Gideon and Fabian don't ring me up to tell me they love me; they ring me up to tell me stupid jokes and tease me when I complain about my problems. That—" She points at her cell. *"That* was a message to specifically tell me they love me, and they wouldn't do that for no reason, Dorcas. *Something* happened to them, and you know what it is."

"I don't know anything," Dorcas denies, remaining calm, unwilling to escalate the situation.

"Then why have you been talking about them in the past tense, like they're already gone?" Molly rasps, and when she blinks, her tears fall.

Shit, Dorcas thinks once again. She's spent the last two days mourning Fabian and Gideon, overly aware that they're dead, and this is the worst way for it to manifest. An unconscious shift from *is* to *was,* because they are already gone.

When Dorcas has been silent for too long, Molly chokes out, "Tell me. Please just tell me. They're my *family,* Dorcas."

"I don't know anything," Dorcas repeats, her heart clenching in her chest, but she remains steady.

"You're lying."

"Molly, I'm not lying. I'm sorry about your brothers, alright? I really am, but I *don't* know anything."

"Yes, you *do,"* Molly snaps, and with that, she grabs her teacup and proceeds to launch its contents right at her.

Dorcas flings herself back with a shriek, because the tea scalds her skin. She crashes into her pantry door, hands flying up to cradle her face, cheeks burning. Due to this, she doesn't see Molly coming, so she's not at all prepared to be slammed back into the door, Molly's forearm pressing into her throat.

This is when Dorcas learns that she *can* throw a punch. It's not just a theory now, proven by the way Molly stumbles back with a groan from the force of Dorcas hitting her in the face. Even still, Molly is a woman scorned, driven by grief and the need for answers as well as closure, so she just keeps right on coming. In seconds, she's flinging herself forward to wrap both hands around Dorcas' throat, throwing her to the floor.

Gasping for air, Dorcas claws at Molly's arms as she climbs on top, *squeezing* at her throat until Dorcas is choking. The lack of air makes her brain *scream,* and no matter how hard she fights, Molly just holds her down—until, abruptly, she lets go.

"Tell me!" Molly bellows, glaring down at her with tears streaming from her eyes. "Tell me, or I swear I'll kill you!"

"Please," Dorcas croaks.

Molly's face twists, and she dives for Dorcas' neck again, audibly weeping. "Just tell me. Just—please just—"

"Th-They're dead," Dorcas chokes out on a wheeze, and Molly's hands instantly go slack around

her throat. Dorcas sucks in deep, painful breaths, her chest heaving.

Molly looks stricken, her face sagging with immediate sorrow and grief. She shakes her head, making a small noise, and then she slumps right off of Dorcas to scoot back against the cabinets beneath the sink. In seconds, Molly is sobbing as she covers her face with both hands.

Slowly, Dorcas sits up, pressing her fingers to her tender throat, still shaking from the assault. Her heart is racing and terror has cold hands wrapped around her spine. She's never been so close to—well, anything like that, honestly. Violence has only ever existed to her in theory, and she's not at all prepared for how it feels in reality.

It's more painful than she was expecting. Her hand throbs from where she hit Molly, and her head is fucking *pounding*. It hurts to swallow, and her throat is sore from the inside out.

And yet, Dorcas thinks the one in the most pain right now is Molly. She's sobbing like she's dying, just these horrible, raw sounds of pure agony. This is only part of what Dorcas was trying to save her from, and it makes her heart ache.

"I'm sorry," Dorcas rasps as she shuffles over and carefully wraps her arm around her. Molly instantly folds over into her arms, weeping into her shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Molly."

"No, no, no," Molly moans. "No, it isn't true. Please tell me it isn't true. Not them. Please, no…"

"I'm sorry," Dorcas says again, because that's all she can really say. "They were such good men. Brave, honorable men. They knew the risks, and they still chose to do the right thing. I know it's not fair, Molly, I'm sorry."

Molly lifts her head slowly, sniffling. "Risks? What risks?"

"I—" Dorcas grimaces. "They wouldn't want you involved. It's not—it isn't *safe,* do you understand? Don't keep pushing. Just let it go, please."

"My brothers are dead," Molly declares, and her voice cracks. Again, tears well up in her eyes, but there's a lot of anger and grief within them as well. "If you think I'm going to stop now, then you know nothing. *What risks?"*

Dorcas takes a deep breath, wincing at the pain it causes. Well, Molly is in this now, isn't she? Frankly, Dorcas doesn't see any other way around this, and all she can do is send a mental apology to Gideon and Fabian, who would have wanted their sister safe. But it's too late for that. "Alright, let's get up so I can clean up the glass all over my floor, take care of my face, and throat. Then I'll tell you about the Order of the Phoenix."

~•~

Sirius heaves a sigh of relief as he steps through the door to the suite. It has indeed been a long fucking day.

He's spent it doing exactly what he expected he would have to, smoothing over Regulus' reaction after Evan died. Most people seemed appeased by Sirius saying it was a response to his grief and the message was intended as a solidarity thing, but because of that and the lack of any interaction between him and James, the support for him has waned. Even James is sort of disappointing people at this point, because he's not flirting with Regulus like he was before. He's not talking at all.

Sirius' stomach tangles into knots with the thought. A quiet James is a cause for concern, because James is rarely quiet. Of course, he has his quiet *moments,* like when he's really invested in a book, or when he's briefly distracted by something shiny, or those random times when he'd get so deep in thought about something that he'd just fall silent because he's so focused. In general, though, James isn't really a quiet person.

It's just not a good sign. Sirius is worried that neither of them are going to manage to bounce back from what's happened so far, and that's unfortunately unacceptable, because there's still so much they have to do. The games aren't over yet, so giving up is *not* an option, not for either of them.

Thankfully, there's been a break. Regulus and James have been traveling all day, but they're taking their time, seeming to embrace the chance to just—adjust. It's a small breath of air in all this shit, and Sirius can't blame them for how they're using it. Sometimes, interacting with people is hard when your life is falling apart on all sides, and it doesn't matter who the person is. It can be someone you grew up with, or even the man you love, and it's still fucking impossible. Sirius understands.

As for Sirius, despite all the sweet-talking and the work he's put in today, he's had something of a break himself. Not having to see James and Regulus fight for their lives or come within inches of death has worked wonders on his nerves. It's his little breath of air after suffocating, one he desperately needed. He's still fucking terrified at all times, but the break has left him basking in the lack of stress too high to handle.

The games are still on, of course, but there's not much happening. No one has died, and the gamemakers are wrapping the day up sooner than normal, dropping the temperature before the sun even sets.

It forces the death eaters to go back over the river, Juniper to dig herself a hole, and the others to settle into their cave. Regulus and James didn't find a cave this time, so they're camping outside next to a big boulder. It's mostly secluded, but it means they won't be able to light a fire through the night for very long without risking someone or something finding them, which forces them to huddle for warmth. Still, it could be a lot worse, and they're so close to the allies that are *still* hoping for James' return.

Sirius is surprised to see the screen off when he comes inside, because usually Remus is waiting for him to watch. He can hear distant voices from the kitchen, so he follows it warily.

"There he is," Pandora says warmly as soon as he comes in. She breaks out into a smile and pushes away from the counter, where she and Remus seem to be in the middle of making…a pan of brownies? Pandora moves over and immediately wraps Sirius into a tight hug. "Been waiting for you."

"Been missing you," Sirius replies softly, hugging her back as he flicks his gaze to the hologram screen in the corner of the room. Pandora has it set up for them, he's assuming, so they don't have to watch in the sitting room. On it, James and Regulus are passing water back and forth in complete silence while getting ready to settle in. Sirius rips his gaze away and leans back to look at Pandora. "How is your father?"

Pandora presses her lips into a thin line. "Not—not doing well, honestly. He insists he'll be fine, though, so he kicked me out and told me to get back to work. He knows how worried I've been for you."

"I'm sorry, Pandora," Sirius whispers, swallowing thickly. Her father is very sick, and has been since the previous year; she would usually stay with Sirius during the games full time, otherwise, but he knows how important it was for her to go check on him.

"No," Pandora assures him. "It's—well, the caretaker is handling him just fine. I'm a handler for you, for our tributes, so I should be here."

Sirius frowns. "If you need to—"

"Stop, Sirius. I want to be here. It's really fine," Pandora says with a heavy sigh.

"Well, if it makes you feel better, I'm glad you are here," Sirius declares sincerely, dipping in to kiss her cheek, pleased when she smiles.

Pandora beams at him. "Remus is making me brownies for my efforts, and my woes."

"Is he now?" Sirius flicks his gaze over to Remus, who gives him a tiny smile as he stirs brownie batter.

"I'm helping," Pandora adds cheerfully. Remus shakes his head behind her back, but there's humor in his eyes.

Sirius chuckles. "I'll help, too."

So, that's what they do. They all come together to make a pan of brownies, and they all clean up the dishes they use, and they all eat warm brownies with a scoop of ice cream when they're ready. Sirius doesn't finish his plate, because he's painfully, viscerally aware that Regulus and James are currently going without such luxury at the moment. In fact, throughout all of this, James and Regulus show up on the screen a few times (not very often, because they're not being 'entertaining'), and they're always just sitting in silence.

Sirius stares at his brownie and ice cream and wishes with all that he has in him that he could just —give it to them. So, yeah, his appetite practically vanishes, and he doesn't finish it.

Still, Sirius feels his chest ache and also go warm with the thought of James and Regulus sort of being here with him right now, even if they don't know it. They're as safe as they'll ever get in the arena, at least for now, and so Sirius feels like he can breathe easier. Of course, them being on a screen isn't really them being *here,* but it's…better than nothing.

If they were here, though, Sirius would nudge Regulus' once, twice, and then a third time until he finally looked over with an exasperated sigh. Sirius would cross his eyes and wiggle his eyebrows to make Regulus smile, like he used to when they were children, and Regulus would try so hard to fight it, but a smile would spread across his face anyway.

And James. Oh, James would be the heart and soul of all the joy and laughter they would all be having if he was here. A grin on his face, warmth in his voice, bouncing around and making them all crack up and tease each other. Tugging on one of Regulus' curls like he used to do when they were young, when he thought Sirius didn't notice, and it would make Regulus scowl instead of blush the way it did when he was a child. Chattering away to Remus, entertaining him with endless little fun facts, getting Remus comfortable with opening up one warm laugh at a time. Teasing Pandora, stealing her brownie when she's not looking, pretending he's innocent when she squints at him suspiciously. Breathing in perfect sync with Sirius, because they're always doing that, always breathing at the same time; even now, every time James inhales and exhales on the screen, Sirius matches him.

It's when he starts cleaning up with Pandora and Remus that it happens. He's wrapping the brownies individually so they can just grab them and eat them whenever they like, and also so Pandora and Remus can wash the pan. He's fighting with the thin plastic wrap when he sees Regulus hold up his finger, indicating for James to give him a minute before they actually curl up under the blanket together.

Their camp is already set up. They have a place to make a quick fire if they get too cold, all the tools within reach and ready. They've had water, but they'll need to refill it tomorrow when they find a source for it. They've had food—the rabbit earlier and also the berries that James had picked for them. So, they're safe, and they've had a relatively calm day, compared to all the ones before it.

Regulus is clearly leaving to take a walk around and make sure they're as secluded as they can get, just one last check that he takes seriously, because he has his dagger in hand. It comes from a sense of paranoia, Sirius knows; if it'll help him actually manage to sleep tonight, Sirius can't begrudge him that. It's clearly cold, though, because Regulus' breath billows out in front of him in a white cloud as he moves silently.

The camera cuts to James suddenly, who has his head tilted back as he looks up at the stars, whispering, "Sirius, I hope you had a better day than I did."

At the sound of James' voice, the kitchen goes silent. Sirius quickly wraps the last brownie and gives James his undivided attention, his heart clenching in his chest.

"It's, ah—well, I don't even know if you're seeing this, if they're showing it to you, but I just…" James swallows thickly and blinks rapidly up at the sky. "I miss you, you know. Maybe it's selfish of me, but I wish you were here. Not *here* here; just here to talk to, I guess. I—I really wish—" He halts, clearing his throat, and then his voice gets softer. "Do you remember when…? I mean, do you remember all the things I said to you? All of it was true, you have to know that, but I—I feel like a hypocrite, because it's—it's so much heavier than I could have ever imagined. I, um, get it now."

Sirius is pretty sure his heart breaks. He has to brace his hands on the counter to keep his legs from buckling, because he *knows* what James is saying. What he isn't saying, more accurately. How hard all this is, how heavily it weighs on you; he gets it now. Sirius can't think of anything more tragic.

James releases a weak laugh, sniffling. "Yeah, I get it now. You are so—you're the strongest person I've ever known, Sirius, and I'm so fucking sorry you had to be. You say—you've *always* said you admire me, but you really don't know how much I've always admired you, especially now." He takes a deep breath, slowly letting it out. "But it's—it's going to be okay. It *will* be. I'm still in this, alright? The plan is still the same. I'm just… I was just having it a little rough, but I'll keep trying. I'm not giving up. Neither is he. We're still in this; we're still here."

Sirius' eyes flutter shut, those words washing over him like a balm to his soul. It's like being gently electrocuted, tenderly shocked awake, so much purpose and relief making something inside him vibrate. He feels—driven, and also soothed. When his eyes peel open again, James is smiling more sincerely.

"I really, *really* hope you've eaten something today. Something like…so good. Like, mouth-wateringly good," James says, then groans quietly. "I'm thinking pornographic thoughts about cake right now, and you can't judge me for it, because I have every right. Did you see what I had today? Fucking *rabbit."*

Sirius doesn't realize he's crying until a wet laugh bursts out of him, a little choked and hitched, his shoulders bowing in as he raises the back of his wrist to his mouth. It's so strange how he suddenly becomes aware of the tears spilling out of his eyes, despite the fact that this might be the best he's felt in days. Acceptable tears. James *always* makes things better.

"Just a cute, little bunny going about his day," James says solemnly, heaving a sigh. "It's alright, though. It's—"

"James, who the fuck are you talking to?" Regulus snaps in a low hiss, abruptly stepping around the boulder.

James jolts, hand flying up to his chest. "Fuck, Regulus, don't *do* that. You nearly scared the piss out of me."

"Well, if you were more alert, that wouldn't happen," Regulus says coldly. "Why are you talking? Shut up."

"If you *must* know," James mutters, "I was talking to Sirius."

Regulus arches an eyebrow. "About?"

"Er, cake, mostly," James mumbles sheepishly.

"Cake," Regulus repeats flatly.

James clears his throat. "I could really go for some cake right now. What about you?"

"Stop talking, James," Regulus says sharply, moving over to snatch up the blanket so he can climb underneath it.

"Shit, Reg, you're *freezing.* Come here, love."

"Don't touch me."

"A bit fucking difficult to do when we're *cuddling,* you utter bastard. Stop being stubborn and—ow! Hey, *watch it."*

"You watch it."

"Then where do I put my hands?" James complains, the mounds of their bodies shifting under the blanket as Regulus visibly struggles to not be close to James even while needing to be close to James to be warm.

Regulus huffs. "Stuff them down your pants for all I care."

There's a pause, then James says, "Or I could—"

"Don't," Regulus snaps.

"I'm just saying, maybe you'd appreciate it if I put them down yours instead," James teases.

"Another word out of you, and I'll put *my* hands down yours just to rip your fucking cock off," Regulus hisses, then makes a low noise of fury as he essentially burrows himself as close to James as he can get, clearly furious about his circumstances.

James falls silent at the threat, as any smart man would, but he seems mostly appeased by the fact that he's holding Regulus now. Sirius exhales slowly in relief, because yeah.

Yeah, they're still in this. They're still here. They're still trying. Somehow, they're going to bounce back and keep going, and this is the first step. They remain quiet, and Sirius watches his brother fall asleep slowly, fitfully, in his best friend's arms.

For now, they're safe, and that's enough.

It's not long before the camera cycles through all the other tributes and Rita comes on the screen. Pandora immediately moves over to blip out the hologram, releasing a deep breath as she turns with a small smile.

"Alright?" Pandora asks him.

"Yeah," Sirius whispers, surprised to find that, for tonight, it's mostly true. "Yeah, I'm alright."

Pandora nods. "Good. Well, I'm in a desperate need of a shower and some sleep. The brownies were good, Remus, thank you. Sirius, I'll see you in the morning, yeah?"

"Of course," Sirius says.

"Goodnight, Pandora," Remus murmurs as Pandora gathers her hologram projector and returns the sentiments before leaving the room with a wave.

Sirius breathes for a little bit, then turns around to find Remus leaning up against the counter behind him, his hands resting by his hips, leaving the target of his torso wide open.

Sirius attacks it.

In the least violent way possible, Sirius slams into Remus' chest and practically melts against him with a deep exhale, his eyes sinking shut. Remus needs no time to catch up; he has his arms around Sirius in seconds, holding him like he was born to. For a long time, they just hold on and breathe.

Sirius doesn't cry. He feels—good. As good as he can feel in his situation. He knows it won't last, and he wants to make the most of it. Just…for right now, for tonight, he has relief and hope coursing through him, and he wants to hold onto the feeling. He wants to hold onto Remus, and be held in return, and he lets it happen. Lets himself have it.

"Hi," Remus whispers.

"Hi," Sirius whispers back.

"Good?" Remus asks, his lips moving against Sirius' temple as he speaks.

"How do you always know?" Sirius whispers, tilting his face closer, hoping to feel more of Remus' mouth. He pressed kisses to his temple and cheek last time, and Sirius wants it again. He wants that, and more.

"I'm assuming you're essentially granting yourself the things you want because you're in mildly better spirits," Remus explains, because he's so smart, and he has Sirius all figured out already. *How* he's managed this, Sirius doesn't know.

"Pretty much," Sirius admits, because now is the best time. There's no guilt for right now. No stress. Maybe it makes him weak, but he wants to bask in it as much as he can. Or maybe that just makes him human. Sometimes, he forgets that he is.

Because Remus always, *always* knows, he gently presses kisses down the side of Sirius' face. Sirius' breath hitches helplessly, his heart thumping heavily in his chest, his entire body fully just tingling by the time Remus' lips graze his jaw. Remus pulls back slowly, looking at him, *studying* him. Sirius sees his eyes flick down to his mouth, then right back up.

Sirius sways forward like a worm on a hook.

Remus' lips twitch.

"Do you need to brush your teeth?" Remus teases, lifting his hand to gently card it through Sirius' hair as he leans in.

"Shut up. I panicked, alright?" Sirius mumbles, a little breathless because of Remus' proximity. "Are you—I mean, are you going to kiss me? Is that allowed?"

"Is that—" Remus chokes on a laugh and leans back to stare at him like he's something amazing. "Sirius, *what?* What does that even mean? 'Is that allowed'?"

"It has just hit me, very belatedly, that this was maybe a bit ridiculous of me to say—"

"A bit?"

"—but, in my defense, I temporarily forgot that it's quite literally not allowed for you, considering your position, but also really acceptable while you're in the suite, should you so wish," Sirius continues to explain, in a ramble. "Not that you have to, obviously, but if—if that was something you...wanted to do, then of course you could. Just—I mean—"

"Sirius," Remus says, amused.

"It's—I only mean it's your choice to do it if you want, or not if you don't. Not—I'm not saying—well, you know, you have that freedom here. With anyone." Sirius pauses briefly. "Wait."

Remus tucks his lips in. "Yes, do go on. I would *love* to hear how you talk yourself around that one."

"Um," Sirius says, frowning. "Well."

"Waiting," Remus reminds him.

Sirius frowns harder. "I don't like it."

"No?" Remus arches an eyebrow. "So, my freedom doesn't extend past the borders of what *you* like? I can only live in the perimeters of what pleases you, is that it?"

"I—no, of course not. You can do whatever you want, as I've said many times before," Sirius mutters, "but I should tell you, if you kiss anyone else other than me, I'm going to be terribly jealous."

Remus' eyebrows fly up. "Oh, just right to it. No talking around that one at all. I barely even got to fuck with you."

"I'm learning."

"I'm oddly proud?"

"Is that—" Sirius pauses, chewing on the inside of his lip, then he blows out a deep breath. "Is it...too much? To feel—to be that way when we're—when this is…" He takes another second and feels his eyebrows tug together. "To be honest, I don't even know what *this* is. What we are."

"What we are," Remus echoes, his voice softening. "I'd say what we are is tragically inevitable and woefully pointless."

Sirius feels like he was just struck. Like *Remus* just struck him. Well, shit, that hurt more than he was expecting. Oh, he's in deep, isn't he? "Pointless. We're...pointless?"

"Reality has never felt the need to be kind," Remus says gently, looking so very sad. "Sirius, we are irrefutably barreling at full speed towards something, but we can't get anywhere. We'll go nowhere. Tell me you know that."

"I don't know that," Sirius croaks.

Remus sighs. "This is my life, Sirius. My servitude to the Hallow is—that's my future. I can't offer you anything else, and I won't try to pretend otherwise. In less than a week, you'll leave the Hallow to go home, and I'll still be here."

"I—I did know that," Sirius confesses, even if he hasn't really allowed himself to think about it. He's had enough to be fucking upset about, hasn't he?

"All that we do here, it means something. Our unavoidable conclusion doesn't take away from that," Remus murmurs, pulling his hand back to cup Sirius' cheek. "We are *something,* but we can't be everything. I—I do wish that we could be. Or I wish we could at least try. If it's easier to be nothing, because we can't be everything, then I understand."

Sirius breathes for a moment, then says, "I don't think I can be nothing with you."

"Is that so?" Remus asks, and it's so soft it's nearly a croon.

"I feel too much," Sirius confesses in a whisper. He exhales shakily. "I—I do have to come back every year, you know. I can bribe the right people to get you assigned to my suite every year, Remus. If—if that's something you'd want."

Remus hesitates for a long moment, lips parting, and then he looks pained. "I can't ask for that, or even expect it. Sirius, you can—you can have a life, one I can't give you. You can have someone who doesn't already belong to other forces out of our control. Someone you can see more than a few weeks out of the year. I can't give you everything, but someone else *can."*

"I'd take being something with you over being everything with anyone else," Sirius tells him.

"Oh, now why would you say that?" Remus breathes out, like he's just been punched.

"It's just the truth," Sirius says softly.

"I told you to warn me," Remus whispers, then slips his hand further down to cradle Sirius' jaw, the only warning he gives before he dips in and kisses him.

Just like that, Remus kisses him.

It's tentative, a little slow, not deep at all. He's being careful, and Sirius' mind has gone blank. All thoughts come to a screeching halt, and he's just frozen in place, not doing anything. He can't help it, because *Remus is kissing him.* Every cell in his body is vibrating at a frequency that's a little concerning, actually, as if he's about to spontaneously combust on the spot. His nerves are pinging all at once, lighting up and flooding him with an overwhelming sense of *everything.*

Sirius doesn't kiss him back, mostly because the whole world seems to have stopped for a moment, and he hasn't the faintest fucking idea what he's meant to do with that. The last time he kissed anyone, or was kissed by anyone, was ten years ago. He doesn't remember if it felt like this; he doesn't really remember it at all, because his memory is shit.

Remus pulls away, careful, and Sirius doesn't remember closing his eyes, but he opens them now to see Remus staring at him cautiously. "Should I not have done that?"

"No," Sirius croaks. He releases a shaky breath, not entirely sure if there's enough oxygen getting to his brain at the moment. He's a little worried he's going to pass out here in a second. "If—I mean, if you like, you—you could do it again."

Apparently, Remus would like, because he does it again after only one pause. Just ducks back in and kisses him a second time, as gentle as the first. Sirius is a bit more prepared for this one, so he tilts his face up into it, letting it wash over him how much he likes it. Oh, but he really likes it. Remus' lips are soft, and he slides one hand down from Sirius' cheek to cup the side of his neck, warm fingers brushing over very sensitive skin. Vaguely, Sirius wonders if Remus can feel the harsh fluttering at the pulse in his throat; his heart is *racing.*

Remus doesn't pull away this time, and Sirius finally kisses him back, still ridiculously pliant, yet helplessly curious for more. There's a moment where it's just the tender brush of mouths, warm pressure pushing in and then alleviating before coming right back. It's almost a tease, and Sirius sways eagerly into the kiss, one hand reaching out mindlessly to settle on Remus' side. He keeps his touch light, trying so very hard not to do anything that he shouldn't.

Then Remus' hand that's still on his cheek pushes back into his hair, and there's the first hint of tongue, just a small, hot swipe along Sirius' bottom lip, and all of Sirius' thoughts of being careful promptly evaporate on the spot. His hand clamps down on Remus' side, fingers digging in slightly as he helplessly rocks forward, seeking more. This seems to please Remus, because he releases a quiet hum of approval against Sirius' mouth and kisses him deeper, now with the added bonus of tongue that Sirius is very much in favor of.

Gradually, Remus goes from kissing him to *really* kissing him, and Sirius can't actually describe the difference between the two, but there is a shift. There's more tongue, for one thing, and the whole mood has changed. It's instinctive the way they're both coming closer together, drawn in naturally as the world around them falls away—the cause behind every bit of distance they've adhered to with one another. It's gone, just like that, and Sirius isn't sad to see it go in the least.

It's like something in Sirius just—snaps. Or maybe it clicks into place. Or maybe it's both, a break that has to be reset, a boundary shattering just to be built anew somewhere else. Whatever it is, he's shaking all over and unable to stop himself from curling into Remus, sliding trembling hands up his chest to wrap arms around his shoulders, pressing them as close together as they can get. Remus responds in kind, kissing him harder, deeper, with more urgency.

But it slows again. With effort. Mostly Remus, because Sirius is currently *gone* on all levels. Remus pulls away, letting them calm as he rests their foreheads together.

Yeah, Sirius is never coming back from this. He's ruined. All that worrying that it'd be him, and it turns out to be Remus. If anyone is in shambles, it's Sirius. Just from one kiss. One taste.

Sirius' eyes flutter open so he can look at Remus, and he thinks, *is it too soon to be sure I love you?*

"What we are…" Remus pulls back slightly and slides his hand forward to cup Sirius' jaw, gently dragging his thumb over Sirius' bottom lip. "What we are is something. We're something, Sirius."

"As long as we're not nothing," Sirius whispers.

"No, never that," Remus whispers back, reassuring him, and he lets Sirius tug him back into his arms. In silence, they lean into each other and hold on.

It's a long time before they let go.

Chapter End Notes

IF YOU WANT TO SKIP THE VIOLENCE, THE SCROLL PAST WHERE

DORCAS APOLOGIZES TO MOLLY AND SAYS SHE DOESN'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT GIDEON AND FABIAN!!!!

if you just want the warning: molly stops by dorcas' place to basically interrogate her about gideon and fabian, looking for answers. dorcas repeatedly lies to her, and in her grief and desperation, molly attacks dorcas. she throws hot tea at her face, and dorcas punches her, and then molly pins dorcas to the floor and briefly chokes her while demanding answers. she immediately stops the moment dorcas admits that fabian and gideon are dead.

for those of you who have finished the chapter...

LILY LILY LILY!!! LILY MY BELOVED!!!! you all have no idea how long i have been waiting to share this chapter, because we finally get to see her. and we have confirmation that she will indeed live!!! LILY IS ALIVE AND SHE IS SAFE!!!

she is also...Dealing With A Lot, clearly. yes, lily is a total rule-breaker, and she's out there sweeping every woman in her age range off their feet, unapologetically and with no shame. a girlboss!!! not letting herself have any meaningful connections in the last five years out of grief, less girlboss of her, but it's valid!

dumbledore.... that man. oh, That Man. i can't really get into depth about him yet without spoiling anything, but there is So Much going on with that man. can't wait to hear everyone's theories!!! also, if he could leave my girl lily alone, that would Be Great. but nooo, of course not, he's decided to Put Her On The Frontlines, whatever that means. we'll see more on that later, i assure you. it'll be a while, but. well, at least now you know she's alive and safe and won't die!!! awful that she believes remus is dead, though :(wonder how she's so sure about that...

(also, side note, kingsley and sybill are gems, i love them so much!!!)

okay, next we got a brief moment with all the mentors, which i think was nice. it was exciting to get to show more of frank and emmeline, who we haven't seen much about just yet. we'll see more of them later.

then you've got dorcas, as well as molly!!! a tense, fraught first meeting, admittedly, but a necessary one. you have to understand where they both were coming from, in this situation. molly knew her brothers were missing and had a feeling that something awful had happened to them, due to gideon's voicemail, and she was desperate and terrified, which made her lash out. meanwhile, dorcas was lying to molly to attempt to protect her and keep her from getting involved, because she thought fabian and gideon would want their sister safe; she was trying to do the right thing.

so, it was one of those things, like, they weren't fighting/having issues because they actually had a problem with each other—they just were in a very shitty, tense situation. we will indeed see molly again!

moving along, we got pandora back!!! now we know why she left to begin with; her father is sick, sadly, but she's back for good now!!! pandora my beloved <3

also that whole scene between james and sirius? heartwrenching, but like, in a good way??? regulus and james still aren't doing well, obviously, but we'll see more of them the next chapter. at least they got a day to just...rest/breathe.

finally, wolfstar!!! oh, wolfstar my loves <3 THEY KISSED!!! i mean, there was a bit of angst bc of their situation. quite literally star-crossed lovers, in this case. like, the whole thing about them being pointless? devastating. and yet they still made the conscious choice to choose each other anyway??? im throwing myself at walls. i adore them so, so much.

tragically inevitable and woefully pointless... so, wolfstar in canon, basically? but never nothing. never that.

alright, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

UPDATING ON SATURDAY

hope you all enjoyed, and ill see everyone on saturday!!! as always, thank you all so much for the support and lovely comments. i genuinely can't express what it means to me <3

Full Circle

Chapter Notes

hello, hello! hope everyone's having a good weekend!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to animal death (because of the whole arena thing, and it's brief, and it's not described in explicit detail)
-references to death/murder
-discussions of dissociative amnesia (just an honest, open conversation about it)

and that's it! enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Remus knocks on Sirius' door without a moment of hesitation.

Just raises his hand, by his own choice, and knocks. No fear, no worry, no restraint. His inner restrictions have been clipped away, and he feels really, *really* good about it.

It doesn't take Sirius very long to open the door, and then there he is, standing in place with bright eyes and damp hair. He looks more rested than he has in days, though the bruises under his eyes from the lack of overall sleep remains, even if they've faded a bit overnight. He's gorgeous, of course, and the first thought Remus has is that he would like to kiss him.

This is…probably rude, honestly, but the thought persists anyway, wild and defiant and wanting. No hello? *Get it together, Lupin,* he thinks, but in his defense, he now knows what it's like to have Sirius' mouth against his own. His lips are so, so unbearably soft. Remus is obsessed already, after one kiss.

"Hi," Sirius breathes out, fidgeting with the doorknob mindlessly as he looks right at Remus with a flush steadily rising in his cheeks.

"Hi," Remus responds, lips curling up.

"I was—I mean, I've been up. Awake. I just had a shower. I wasn't avoiding you," Sirius blurts out.

Remus arches an eyebrow. "I didn't think you were. Why would you be avoiding me?"

"Do you remember last night?" Sirius asks, his voice strained.

"Hm," Remus hums, lips twitching again. "Last night… Last night… We watched the games, then we made brownies... Yeah, I remember."

This doesn't make Sirius smile or blush, like Remus was expecting it to. Instead, he looks… uncomfortable, or maybe anxious and vaguely upset, or all three. "Remus, you—um, just don't—don't fuck with me about...memories. I have this—I have memory issues, so it's—complicated."

"Memory issues," Remus repeats, a surge of guilt rising within him in an instant, because he *was* fucking with Sirius. He had assumed that Sirius' reaction yesterday and the starting day of the games was something of a trauma response. He wasn't aware that it was a common thing, a recurring problem in day-to-day life, even on good days. Or, mostly good days.

"It's not—" Sirius heaves a weary sigh. "It's not from my time in the arena. Well, it is, but not physically. Like, it's not from a head injury or anything. I mean, I have a lot of different issues I accumulated from the arena, and most of them affect my mind more than my body. I just—sometimes, I sort of...blink out of existence, it feels like, and I can't remember anything that happened while I was gone. My body carries on, but I'm not *present,* really. Like you said, when it seemed like I was gone for a little while; that's because I *was."*

"Oh," Remus says softly, his heart clenching. He knew, or he could guess, but he didn't have all the details before this. "Is that—are there triggers for it?"

"Sometimes, yeah," Sirius admits. "Could be a form of defense, I think, because it can happen when I'm...really upset, or angry, or stressed. Too much of it to handle, and my brain just sort of—blocks it all out. But sometimes, no, it just happens. Nothing I can really do about it, honestly. It used to be much worse when I was younger, so it's gotten easier to live with, but it's still—well, it's never going away."

"You don't get the memories back?" Remus asks.

"No. Never," Sirius tells him quietly. He takes in a shuddering breath and starts fiddling with his shirt. "My memory is pretty shit. It's really spotty, especially before the games, and I barely remember my first year *after* the games at all. The games themselves—of course I remember them,

every single second, which is just—" He scoffs. "The one thing I'd *like* to forget, and it's what I remember the most."

Remus grimaces. "That's…"

"Fucked up? Bad luck? Yeah, I know." Sirius tosses up a hand, looking agitated, and he has every right to. "Anyway, memory is a complicated, delicate sort of thing for me, so… And, well, sometimes I have really happy memories that aren't—they're not real, or I can't be sure they are, or they're really disjointed and out of order. Who knows what the fuck my brain is doing, honestly? So, if—if I have really, *really* good memories that feel too good to be true, I...tend to doubt them."

"I see," Remus says quietly, aching for the man across from him. The man who doesn't deserve this. No one deserves this, but Sirius… Oh, it's breaking Remus' heart. It makes him want to get a hold of every person who had a hand in hurting Sirius and fully just—rip them apart.

Sirius clears his throat. "Right, so I have this really very good memory of last night that I'm desperately hoping I didn't just dream up in my head. Please tell me we actually kissed."

"Yes, we did. It was lovely," Remus tells him, and tension eases out of Sirius' shoulders instantly. His eyes absolutely light up, and then there's that grin of his, the one that nearly turns Remus into a puddle each time he sees it. As sad as it is that Sirius had to ask, it's sort of sweet that he gets to be this happy about it a second time. He was this visibly happy the first, too.

"Brilliant!" Sirius declares with genuine delight, like he really is an outside audience having a thrilling theory confirmed and ceaselessly pleased to be right about it. Remus has never seen something so simultaneously tragic and adorable all at once. Sirius gives him a playful sultry look, and perhaps his 'smoulder' is meant to be a joke, but it looks...unfairly good, actually. "Was it as good as I remember?"

"It was exactly as good as you remember," Remus assures him, amused when Sirius grins wider and pretends to bow.

"Thank you, thank you," Sirius says grandly, as if he's winning an award and giving his acceptance speech. "I'd like to thank Mary Macdonald, my pillow, the side of my hand, and James Potter's cheek that time I licked him to assert my dominance and stake my claim when I was thirteen and Zachary Zilloway dared to call James his best friend."

Oh, he really did give an acceptance speech. This idiot. Remus huffs out a weak laugh and covers his face with his hand, so helplessly smitten that it's pathetic. "You *licked* him?"

"Like a dog, just right up the side of his face, then stared directly into Zilloway's eyes until he was so uncomfortable that he literally just left," Sirius says cheerfully.

"And what did James have to say about this?" Remus asks in amusement as he drops his hand.

Sirius chuckles. "He thought it was hilarious."

"Of course he did," Remus says. "You're both ridiculous."

"I believe his exact words were *oh, just piss on me next time, why don't you?* And then I told him not to challenge me, because I absolutely would. And then he dared me to do it the next time, and I *would have,* mind you, but Zilloway got a new best friend a week later. James says he was unfaithful, but I like to think he knew I had defeated him," Sirius explains with a shrug.

"Why does that not surprise me?" Remus mutters.

"In my defense, I was only thirteen." Sirius' smile slips a bit, his eyebrows furrowing. Then he frowns. "I think. Or maybe twelve? I don't really—I mean, I know we were young. I do know that. Ah, it doesn't matter, really. You get my point."

Remus offers him a gentle smile. "I do, yeah." He pauses, then takes a deep breath. "Can I…ask? If you're uncomfortable talking about it, of course we don't have to. I just—"

"No, it's fine." Sirius clears his throat. "Ask away."

"It's just…" Remus trails off, trying to figure out how to word what he wants to say. "Well, what would *you* like me to do? When it happens, I mean. You just—carry on as usual, so I suppose I'm asking how you'd like for me to help."

Sirius blinks. "Oh. Well, I—don't know, honestly. I mean, before you, no one ever realized I was… gone. Because, like you said, I just carry on, so it's hard to notice."

"Okay," Remus says. "If there's anything you *don't* want me to do, you can tell me that as well. I mean, I wouldn't do anything anyway, really, but you get my point."

"Yeah, I know. It doesn't bother me," Sirius tells him. "I mean, well, obviously it bothers me that I'm just forgetting shit all the time against my will, but that's not what I meant. Just, it doesn't bother me that it happens around you, or however you respond to it. I trust you."

He says it so flippantly, so casually, like it's a fact that's set it stone, one everyone should know already, not even a big deal. *He* clearly doesn't seem to think this is a big deal at all, not even batting an eye about it, like he's known it forever.

Remus feels his heart swell until it almost *hurts,* like it might fucking explode. He's not aware of how he's going to reply to this until the words are already tumbling from his mouth in a breathless rush. "Please tell me you've brushed your teeth already, because I would very much like to kiss you again."

Sirius breaks out into a grin, stifling a laugh, and then he reaches forward to grab Remus by his collar and slowly, oh so slowly, reels him in. He teases, "You're in luck; my teeth are, in fact, brushed," and then tugs Remus in a kiss to prove it.

There's no hesitation this time. Sirius goes for it eagerly, like he wants it just as much as Remus does. He cups Remus' jaw and winds his other hand into Remus' hair, kissing him and kissing him and kissing him so deeply that Remus sort of loses track of…everything, honestly. Anything that's not Sirius in his arms and Sirius' mouth against his own just *does not matter.*

Remus pulls Sirius closer to better feel him, and he's so—fuck, he's just perfect. Everything about him is wonderful; the heat of his mouth, the soft feeling of his hair, the shape of him as he leans forward to press them closer together. There's the soft drag of Sirius' tongue, experimental, and then he's making a quiet noise into the kiss as he turns mindlessly to push Remus up against the door. Remus goes willingly, already distracted by his hand in Sirius' hair and the feeling of Sirius' teeth nipping at his bottom lip, testing, exploring.

It's almost—novice? Like he's not entirely sure what he's doing, what he enjoys, or what he doesn't…so he's figuring it out. Remus doubts that's true, but he can admit that he likes how thorough Sirius is, taking the time to make the kiss really, *really* good. It's mind-blowingly good, so his efforts are *not* wasted. The longer they do it, the more settled into it Sirius becomes, and Remus is more than happy to stay right here and let Sirius take his time to do whatever he wants.

However, Sirius' bottom lip is eventually too tempting to ignore, and he just *needs* to feel it between his teeth. Actually, he needs to do a lot of things, and he sets out to do them because Sirius is *letting him.* In fact, he seems on board and in full support, if the soft moan that escapes him and the way he curls into the kiss are anything to go by. He's so, so responsive; reacting to it all like he's never felt it before, like Remus himself is introducing him to what it is to feel good. Remus knows that's not possible, but he relishes the feeling anyway.

The kiss breaks as Sirius sucks in a deep breath, his fingers flexing in Remus' hair, a shudder rippling through him as he takes a second to breathe. He's panting. Remus chuckles, low and warm, then ducks his head and mouths along Sirius' jaw, heading right for his neck.

"Oh, that's—mm, that's really—" Sirius cuts himself off with a choked noise, his head falling back as Remus apparently finds a sensitive spot. Sirius must *really* like it, because he arches closer with a muffled groan.

Remus pulls back minutely, with a truly impressive amount of patience. "I shouldn't do that too much. You bruise so easily."

"Don't care. Do it," Sirius whispers, tugging on Remus' hair.

"People will see," Remus warns. "They'll come up with their own conclusions and make assumptions—

"Let them," Sirius cuts in breathlessly. "I don't care what anyone thinks when they look at me. Don't let that stop you, because it's certainly not about to stop *me."*

"No one will know. They'll look at you and think you've gone to bed with some sponsor; they'll look at the marks and be jealous of some made-up rich person in their head. Some people will even claim that it's them, but no one will know. No one but you, when you look in the mirror," Remus murmurs, giving in and dragging his mouth back to Sirius' neck. He starts slowly, humming when Sirius practically vibrates against him. "And me. I'll know, too."

"Yes, yes, yes," Sirius chants, his voice pitched high, and he sounds like he's just heard the best news of his life. At this moment, Remus thinks he could get Sirius to agree to absolutely anything. He's so eager. So *earnest.*

Remus does it on purpose then, and does it *with* purpose, too. Single-minded focus. He leaves

marks on Sirius' throat, up and down the side, high and low. Throughout, Sirius breathes hard and gasps and hisses between his teeth, and Remus closes his eyes to bask in the beautiful sounds of him. Sirius squirms against him, tugging restlessly on his hair, so Remus drops both hands to his waist to hold him still.

Sirius proceeds to curse under his breath and slam his free hand against the door right next to Remus' head, over his shoulder, and Remus reflexively jumps a little and pulls back to make sure Sirius is alright. Sirius groans and says, "Sorry, sorry, I'm—shit, I'm sorry. That was—I just wasn't expecting this to feel so good. Sorry. Don't—you don't have to stop, I'm fine. I am *so* fine right now, Remus."

"Okay," Remus says, stifling a laugh. He wrinkles his nose playfully and leans in to bump it against Sirius', earning a soft huff of laughter. "Just don't break the door. Or your hand."

"I'll do my best," Sirius mumbles, sounding winded.

Remus grins at him and teases, "What, no past lover ever made it good for you before?"

"Um." Sirius clears his throat. His pupils are blown and his face is already flushed, but Remus can tell when he's blushing from being flustered, rather than riled up. He shifts a little and gives Remus a weak smile. "Well, that's the thing. I've never *had* past lovers. I'm—I've never been with anyone."

"You—" Remus blinks, genuinely startled. "What?"

Sirius frowns. "I know my reputation suggests otherwise, but I thought you said you didn't believe any of that shit."

"I don't," Remus says quickly, eyes wide. "I just assumed—I mean, maybe at home? Or maybe a Hallow here or there, just not as much as they say. Which is—that would be *fine,* Sirius."

Sirius huffs. "Well, no, I haven't. The only thing I've ever done is kiss Mary Macdonald when I was sixteen and nothing else since. Believe it or not, becoming a sex object for the Hallows tends to put one off sex."

"Okay, that's—that's okay, Sirius," Remus murmurs, holding his gaze. "I mean, actually, no, that's

not okay. That's awful, and I'm sorry you've had to deal with that. But I mean, it's okay as in—we don't have to do anything."

"Well…good," Sirius snaps, clearly defensive. Somehow, Remus has offended him, or upset him, or both. He pulls away, not looking pleased at all. "Good, because we're not."

Remus holds his hands up in surrender. "Of course."

Sirius frowns at him some more, and they just stand there in near-stifling silence for a few minutes, and *then* Sirius is right back on him like he never even left. In seconds, he's kissing Remus again, basically pinning him to the door with his enthusiasm, groaning into the kiss like a man discovering a miracle. Remus laughs breathlessly, unable to help it, and Sirius mumbles *smug bastard* against his lips before essentially shoving his tongue in Remus' mouth to give him something to do other than laugh. Remus takes it like the gift it is.

They're still going at it (rather thoroughly, too) when a yelp makes them both split apart to see Pandora clapping her hand over her eyes as she half-turns away. "Oh! I didn't—I was just going to wake Sirius. I'm sorry."

"It's fine." Remus clears his throat and straightens up. "Really, Pandora, you're fine."

"I made breakfast," Pandora says weakly, still not uncovering her eyes. Her lips curl up. "Sorry to interrupt. I wasn't aware that you two had…made it to this point."

"It's a new development," Sirius mumbles.

"Well, that's lovely," Pandora declares cheerfully. "I'll just go, then. Leave you to your… development. Right. Excuse me."

"Thank you for making breakfast!" Remus calls after her gratefully, and Pandora just waves over her shoulder with a quiet giggle as she disappears up the hall.

Sirius groans and drops his forehead against Remus' shoulder, gently banging his head to it. "I didn't even hear her coming."

"If it makes you feel any better, neither did I." Remus reaches up and cards his fingers through Sirius' hair, then gently nudges him to tilt his face up. Sirius does, and Remus leans in to give him a sweet, short kiss that makes Sirius sigh softly when he pulls away. Remus smiles. "Come on. You have a long day ahead of you, and you need breakfast."

"Right," Sirius says. "Yes. That."

Chuckling, Remus reaches down to grab Sirius' hand to tangle their fingers together, then tugs him up the hall. Sirius follows after him with a lopsided, triumphant grin.

~•~

James knows where he and Regulus are, but he's taking care not to mention it. He's planning to just casually go, "Oh, look at that convenient cave over there," and then drag Regulus inside before he gets suspicious. Surely that will work.

It's day five. Eleven tributes still remain. No one has died since Mulciber, and the fact that a group of people have lasted in a cave undetected and *safe* for this long means that James wants almost fervently to get Regulus there. Just for a day or two, at the very least. They'll outnumber the death eaters that way, too, and since he and Regulus killed three out of seven of their members, he feels it's in their best interest to get somewhere they won't be easily found. They need more time.

The previous day was—bad. Very, very fucking bad. Well, all days have been bad, frankly, but regardless. James and Regulus spent the previous day not speaking or looking at each other, the both of them too lost in their own head, dealing with their own pain and grief and anger.

It has carried over into today. They've gotten a late start, because they both kept waking up from nightmares, so neither of them really slept well. Regulus is being quiet again, and James is so fucking exhausted that he's tempted to join him in silence. It suddenly feels like the hardest thing to do to crack jokes and find things to talk about; Regulus has shut down, and James would swear that some inner light in himself has gone out.

Still, James meant what he said to Sirius last night. They're still here, and they're still trying, and the plan is still the same. James is getting Regulus through this, and nothing is going to stop him. There is no force in this world that *could* stop him, at this point. Really, it's his most driving motivation now, especially inside the arena. It's the one thing that's keeping him going when he wants to sit down and just—weep.

In a way, James wants to thank Regulus for that, because even now—even here—James is finding comfort in him. Purpose. Hope. Without him even knowing it, Regulus is giving him something to live for, to *fight* for, simply with every breath he takes.

In just knowing that, and experiencing the arena, James is starting to learn things about himself that he never really stopped to think about before.

For one, he's a caretaker. He *likes* to take care of people. It makes *him* feel better to make other people feel better, and he generally knows how to do that. It comes naturally to him and gives him a sense of accomplishment. Sometimes it's tiring, and sometimes it drains him, and sometimes he forgets that he needs to be taken care of, too, *but* overall—it's the most rewarding thing he's ever done in life.

Another thing, he's a bit too attached to his morals. He thinks, if Regulus wasn't in here with him, he would struggle to fight as he has. Having a purpose to focus on, a *goal* that supersedes what he's willing to do to survive, might just be the one thing that's helped him survive this long. He's killed people. Like, he's taken lives. He's not sure if he would have been able to do that if he wasn't fighting *for* something—or someone, more accurately—because he doubts he would have been willing to put the importance of his own survival over anyone else's, in which case he would have been dead by now.

Lastly, he's a lot more resilient than he ever realized. He has now suffered things he's only been exposed to through those closest to him, and he honestly never thought he would be strong enough to handle it, and yet he is. Somehow, he is. Somehow, despite everything, he's still going.

He just keeps going.

That means something to James. That's *important* to James. Maybe it makes him an optimist, he's not sure, but he really believes what he said to Regulus. Who he is, who they *really* are, that's theirs; no one can take that from them. It can be altered, and it can be shaped beyond recognition, but what they're made of, what makes them up as people, *can't* be erased. And James is still holding onto that, refusing to ever, ever let go. He'll be him until his last breath.

So, James ruminates on these things for the first hour of the morning when he and Regulus are getting ready and setting out in silence. It's actually a bit of a soul-searching moment for him, if he's honest, and it helps settle him more than he's expecting it to. Of course, the fact that they still have a long way to go and a lot ahead of them also helps him essentially get his shit together, as much as he's able to.

Next is Regulus himself, who has most definitely gotten as distant as he possibly can whilst stuck traveling *with* James. It's eerily similar to the way he was at fifteen, how he's just *pulling away,* refusing to let anyone get close to him. Losing Evan was a major hit for him.

Frankly, James is upset about it because Evan was nice and helpful and funny, and death is upsetting, but it's not hitting him as hard as Regulus, who actually got close to him seemingly by accident. Of course he would never do that on purpose, purely to avoid exactly what he's feeling right now, but it was one of those things that just happened *anyway.* Without even meaning to, he made a friend that he trusted, and then he lost him. James' heart aches for him.

James doesn't know what to do about this. How to help. He doesn't even know if he *can* help, because this is one of those things where Regulus should be *allowed* to hurt for it. He should be allowed to take the time to grieve how *he* needs to.

The problem is, they're in the hunger games, and they're not afforded such luxuries. Regulus *can't* slow down to grieve. He *can't* shut down and retreat into himself. He *can't* do all the things he should be allowed to do in response to losing a friend, because if he does, he could die as well.

James spends a lot of time trying to figure out the best way *to* help, but he genuinely can't think of one thing to do or say, which oddly gives him anxiety. Then, out of nowhere, Regulus abruptly changes direction *away* from the cave where the others are, and James has his opening.

"Wait, wait, where are you going?" James blurts out, skipping forward to whirl in front of him and cut him off.

Regulus blinks, dead-eyed. It's unsettling. "That…way?"

"Why?" James asks, baffled.

"Because we can't keep going *that* way," Regulus says slowly, like he's talking to an idiot. He points in the direction they were just going in, the direction James *really* wants them to continue going in, because they're so close now. "It's not smart. We'll just loop back around, and eventually, we'll run into the death eaters if we keep going."

James purses his lips. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do. This place is a circle, James. The woods wrap around in a ring."

"How do you know? Have you completed a circuit?"

"I—" Regulus huffs, looking offended. "No, but I don't *need* to. The crimson river wraps around the cave and the entire forest wraps around the crimson river. It's just common sense."

"You think you're so smart, don't you?" James asks, hands on his hips.

Regulus narrows his eyes. "I do, actually."

"Yeah?" James inclines his head in the direction he wants to go in suggestively. "Prove it."

"I don't *have to,"* Regulus snaps. "There's no need for me to prove I'm right. I'm just fucking *right.* Now, shut up and walk."

"I think you do have to prove it this time," James hedges. He knows he's pushing it, but—well, desperate times and all that. He raises his eyebrows. *"This time,* I think you're wrong."

That does the trick. Regulus' eyes light up. With fury, yes, but they do light up. James is taking his wins, at this point.

For the next twenty minutes *at least,* James dissolves into a long-winded bickering war with Regulus about his sense of direction, which James doesn't *actually* have a problem with in reality, but if there's one thing James has learned in the last decade, it's how to get on Regulus' nerves. Really, James takes great pride in the fact that no one annoys Regulus like him.

At one point, James has admittedly let Regulus' tirade fade into the background a bit, but that's not his fault, really. He can't be blamed for it. Regulus has a flush on his cheeks, and his eyes are brighter than they've been since the third night, and he's just—he's so beautiful. Even here, having gone four days without soap and a shower, only water to essentially have quick bird-baths with, still covered in dried blood and flipping his dagger carelessly, mindlessly through his fingers—even right here, like this, he is so fucking beautiful.

Frankly, James is having borderline inappropriate thoughts, which is how he comes to the conclusion that he is severely depleted of his need for affection. He feels like he's going to go insane if he doesn't get to touch someone the way his fingers itch to. Not even in a sexual way; he wants to just—bump shoulders with someone, or just sit with his thigh pressed to someone else's, and he'd probably collapse if someone just so happened to hug him right now. Fucking hell, he's *touch starved.* Literally starved for touch.

Holding onto Regulus at night honestly might be the only thing that's kept him sane so far, but he's overly aware that Regulus doesn't *want* to be touched, especially recently. There was, of course, all the gentle touches between them when they were using the salve, but that was in the aftermath of violence. There's so much violence, and James wants… Well, he wants affection for the sake of affection.

He wants *Sirius,* frankly. They're always affectionate, and have been since they were children. Regulus, less so, even when he *was* a child, though he sometimes let Sirius be his exception. Even when Regulus had a crush on him, he was never one to go out of his way to touch James; he let James touch him, even seemed to get flustered and pleased every time James did, but of course James took that for granted and didn't do it very often. By the time he started *wanting to,* it was already too late.

James wonders how many days, how many weeks, months, *years* Regulus went just hoping that James would touch him, and now James wants to do exactly that so badly that his hands fucking *ache,* only for Regulus to be perpetually out of reach, even when James could just reach out and touch him. It's not wanted, and that makes all the difference in the world.

"—just basic circumference, and the cave is the midpoint of the diameter," Regulus is ranting, utterly oblivious to how much James wants to hold him right now.

Blinking violently, James clears his throat and says, "Oh, yes, keep talking about math. There's absolutely nothing more attractive. You're a swot. If you tell me what the mitochondria is, I'm not sure I'll be able to restrain myself."

"The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell," Regulus mumbles, then frowns. "First of all, that's science; that's not even *close* to math. Second of all, I'm not a swot."

"You're absolutely a swot," James replies with a snort. "You've always been a little nerd, what are you on about? Don't think I've forgotten about your journals, all that writing you used to do, your obsession with sad boy poetry. Oh, I remember."

Regulus scowls at him. "Sad boy poetry? Fuck off."

"Baby Black and his little diaries with the flowers pressed in between the pages," James teases, helplessly fond. He's always found that unbearably cute, quite frankly. "You know, I'll bet you used to write about *me,* didn't you?"

Regulus scowls harder, his face growing even more red than it has so far, and he very aggressively does *not* answer.

James chokes on a stunned laugh. "Wait, actually? You *did?"*

"Fuck off, James," Regulus grinds out.

"No, shut up, that's *adorable,"* James declares breathlessly, more delighted than he's been in *days.* "You had a crush on me and wrote about it in your journals. That is so… You cannot *imagine* how pleased I am by this. Go on, what did you write?"

"Why would I remember that?" Regulus grumbles. "Obviously I haven't written anything about you in the last ten years."

"No?" James asks, oddly disappointed, because even if Regulus was just writing about how much he hated him, then at least he'd still be writing *about* him. "Well, I mean…surely you've read your old journals, Regulus."

Arching an eyebrow, Regulus says, "No, I haven't, because I burned them."

"You—" James is inexplicably betrayed by this. "What, why?"

"Because, when you're a fifteen year old boy, that's what you do to get over your first—" Regulus halts, that sentence hanging there in the resounding silence after he snaps his mouth shut so hard his teeth clack together.

James raises his eyebrows. "First…?"

"Crush," Regulus fills in, and it's like pulling teeth. Actually, James is pretty sure that Regulus would much prefer to rip his teeth out one-by-one from the root than admit out loud that he used to have a crush on James. "When you're fifteen years old and getting over your first crush, you burn all the journals that have any shameful, incriminating evidence of said crush, so at least four years of journals are ash thanks to you."

"That's really… I don't know, love, that's a bit much, isn't it? Seems like it came from a place of passion, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you."

"Well, I'm just saying," James murmurs, tipping his head to the side. "It's a shame about the journals, really. Maybe if you read them again, you'd remember what you liked about me."

"Oh, I never forgot," Regulus says. "I just grew to hate it."

James' lips twitch. "So, what *did* you like about me, then? What was it you grew to hate, Regulus?"

Regulus looks at him for a long moment, and James doesn't think he's going to answer at first, but then—shockingly—he whispers, "You made me feel."

"Feel what?" James asks, his heart racing.

This time, Regulus doesn't answer. He just turns and starts walking away, leaving James to stare after him as his mind struggles to figure out what *exactly* he made Regulus feel, and how he could possibly do it again.

Though, really, there's no point in trying. James knows how this ends, so every single moment that feels like something important, something *special,* can't go anywhere. James just finds himself lost in it over and over, compulsively seeking it out, because he can't help how he feels. To him, there's so much meaning in it, in all they get to have, in every interaction and stolen slices of time they have left together.

That's another thing James is learning. His love is a lot like survival. It just keeps going, no matter what. Survival is an ugly process, and here they are, still so hideously alive; much the same, James is still so hideously in love.

"No, really, feel *what?"* James insists, rushing to catch up to him, quite literally desperate to know.

Regulus continues to ignore him, clearly reaching his quota for sharing today. James knows he's not getting anything else out of him, not now, so he sighs and internally puts a pin in it. He *will* be returning to that later.

For now, the goal is to not alert Regulus to the fact that he's going back in the direction James originally wanted him to go in. Another twenty minutes of walking, and they'll reach the others. Honestly, James is eager to see Vanity, especially. He's been worrying about her during the cold nights. It'll be nice to see Peter, Irene, and Mathias, too.

He starts getting mildly nervous as they get closer, because he's just—assuming that they're there. For all he knows, they could have moved days ago. James has been gone since the morning of the second day. He's not entirely sure if the gamemakers would have just…left them alone, but at the same time, there was so much activity over the last few days with them and the death eaters that maybe the gamemakers didn't feel the need to bother with anyone else.

The viewers can only watch a few things at one time. The gamemakers wouldn't want to overwhelm them with too much too quickly. Sirius did mention that fact and how it might be used to their advantage, so James is hoping that the others are safe at the moment and still where he left them.

As they draw closer, James *really* hopes that's the case, because there's rustling in some bushes that makes him and Regulus both freeze. They both have their weapons raised and at the ready in an instant, always a little bit on edge now, just this persistent paranoia and preparation to fight.

Regulus is closest to the bushes, and he moves even closer in complete silence, his dagger held in his hand. The bushes rustle harder, and then a form comes bursting out of it, which Regulus responds to immediately. In seconds, he's sweeping whoever it is off their feet and crouching down to put his dagger to their throat, cutting off their sharp yelp.

"Peter?" James blinks, then brightens. "Peter!"

"James?" Peter asks, his voice shaking.

"Hey!" James says cheerfully, rushing over to beam down at him. There are discarded mounds of fur on either side of him that James is pretty sure he had in his hands; animals from traps, no doubt. "Oh, collecting food?"

Peter makes a quiet noise of pure terror. "Ah, yes."

"Alright?" James asks with a frown, and then it belatedly hits him that Regulus is *still* pinning him to the ground with a blade to his throat. James' eyes bulge, and he dives forward to quickly peel his wrist away. "Fuck's sake, Reg, it's just *Peter."*

"Thank you," Peter wheezes, shakily pushing himself up. He blinks at them, taking a deep breath as he reaches up to press his trembling fingers to his throat. "Um, nearly dying aside, it's brilliant to see you, James. We've been worried."

"I told you I'd be back," James informs him with a grin. He can't actually remember if he promised that or not, not anymore, because it feels like a lifetime ago now—but, well, it feels like something he would have said. "Is Irene and Mathias here? I sent them this way."

"Yeah, they're here," Peter confirms, nodding as he reaches out to gather what he dropped.

Abruptly, Regulus launches to his feet and stalks away without a word, making James stare after him. Peter blinks, then looks at James in visible confusion.

"Just, er, give us a second," James mumbles.

"Having a bit of a domestic?" Peter asks wryly.

James heaves a sigh. "You have no idea."

~•~

Regulus is going to kill James. Considering his current setting and situation, this isn't an idle threat. He hasn't heard a cannon in a while, and a part of him is itching for it, signaling that he's closer to the end. James being dead; one step closer.

Oh, Regulus is absolutely going to murder him. Just—just take out his dagger, put it to his throat, watch the way he gets that look in his eye every time. A *gleam.* A twinkle. That arrogant, self-assured confidence that Regulus could smother right out of him by sliding that blade slowly, so slowly, across his throat until blood bubbles up, and maybe James' breath would hitch, maybe he'd *moan—*

"Oh, I'm fucked up," Regulus mutters under his breath, utterly furious. Lovely, he's gone fully mental. So exposed to violence that it's even starting to blend with *sex.*

Growling under his breath, Regulus stomps further away into the forest, his whole body itching. He's angry, yes, and also reluctantly impressed that James managed to guide him here purely because he knows him so well, knows exactly what buttons to push. Oh, Regulus *hates* that he fell for it. James fucking *swindled* him into this. Manipulative prick.

Regulus comes to a halt, taking a deep breath before slowly releasing it, dagger in hand and ears straining as he listens for sounds of any possible approach. Reflexively, he glances up to scan the trees. He always thinks to look up now.

Evan is never there.

For a moment, Regulus lets his eyes drift shut. Things have been—difficult. He's been feeling like he's moving under water since Evan died, since James killed Mulciber. Fussing at James earlier sort of felt like…resurfacing for a bit, which he hadn't seen coming. He'd thought he was appreciative of how muffled everything had gotten, like it was all coming from a distance and he was left in a fugue state.

He's been on autopilot, but only in the sense that the plane has been crashing in slow motion. Shutting down, as it turns out, isn't quite the simplest thing to do when he's overly aware that doing so could kill him. It's like his survival instincts were at war with the feeling that he was already dead inside.

So, no, he wasn't expecting for it to feel—good to just…be, for a moment. Like coming up for air he desperately needed, even though he didn't even know he was hoping for it. Just hearing the sound of his own voice, the life in it, left him feeling less disoriented. Hearing *James'* voice, seeing his smile, feeling the warmth of his gaze… Well, strangely, it turned out to be the most comforting

thing to happen to him in a while.

Which is a shame, because Regulus is going to *kill* James.

In a moment. Whenever he catches up.

Regulus doesn't doubt that James is going to follow him, even with his stupid *allies* within range. It's sort of nice being alone for a few minutes, though. He's been in such close quarters with James for the last few days with barely any breaks, and he hasn't been able to get away, even for a moment, at least not in situations that didn't involve running and fighting for his life. And that… That's been suffocating in its own way, which is bewildering, because how can James be both a breath of fresh air and the sensation of being smothered?

Regulus just—he just needs *one* moment.

He gets it.

For a longer than a moment, even longer than two, Regulus is left completely, entirely alone. At first, it's good. He breathes. He takes the time to just *breathe,* inhaling deep and exhaling slow. His mind is empty, wiped clean, and for a bit, he's completely calm. Just sort of existing, really.

And then Regulus looks around. He's careful about it, making no noise as he swivels in place, looking for something. It takes him an embarrassingly long moment to realize that no, he's not looking for something at all, but rather *someone.* James. Less than a minute without him, and he's searching for him.

There's a creeping sense of doubt crawling through him that maybe James isn't going to follow him. He's found his allies, hasn't he? Maybe he's done with all Regulus is indirectly (and sometimes directly), yet indisputably responsible for putting him through. Frankly, if Regulus could cut himself loose and get away, he would the first chance he got, all while saying *good fucking riddance.*

Swallowing, Regulus stands in place and feels ridiculously small. Like a lost child unsure how to find his way home. Fumbling in the dark, desperate for some light.

Then, like the living embodiment of the sun that he is, James breaks through the trees with his

hatchet in hand and a wary, yet determined expression on his face. Regulus hears the tiny, quiet exhale of relief that escapes his own lips and hates himself for it.

James, of course, is clearly expecting an argument, but it's obvious from his demeanor that he's ready to put up a fight. Regulus, of course, is absolutely going to argue with him, just as soon as he shakes off the urge to go over and crawl into his arms and never, never leave them again.

Why is he having heart flutters *now?* James hasn't even done anything! He's just—there.

Yeah, Regulus is going to have to kill him.

"I'm going to kill you," Regulus announces.

"Listen—"

"No. Absolutely not."

"Just hear me out, yeah?" James says, his voice strained. He moves closer almost cautiously. "You remember when you said you would think about it?"

Regulus glares at him. "I haven't exactly had the time to do much thinking about it, have I?"

"No, maybe not, but you don't need to," James tells him. "Reg, they are secluded and *safe.* With them, we outnumber the last four death eaters, and maybe we can actually *do* something with that. The death eaters have a place to go back to, and they move in numbers, don't they? That's because it's smarter."

"Yes, and look where that's gotten them, James."

"Having numbers and a base claimed isn't the reason they've lost three already. *We're* the reason, so don't even try it."

"I know," Regulus murmurs, because he's very aware of what he and James have done. It's

imprinted in his brain. "I just—"

"There's a steady source of water, and they've plenty of traps set up that actually catches things," James continues in a rush, shaking his head. "They've insulated the cave to be warmer, or so Pete says, and you can burn a fire in there without drawing attention. Irene and Mathias are fairly good fighters, and even Peter can throw a punch, so it's not like they're all helpless. I mean, even Vanity is willing to beat the piss out of someone if she has to. I've seen it. She really had a go at Peter when we first showed up here, you know. And—and they've survived here for *days,* Regulus. Days. So, we can, too."

"James—"

"And I know you're worried about the death eaters because they're no doubt looking for us, and they have weapons, but apparently the others are working on a way to get weapons for themselves as well, and I think we should help them."

"I don't *trust* them," Regulus snaps.

James hesitates, then heaves a sigh. "Alright, fine, you don't trust them. I'm not asking you to trust them. You trust *me,* don't you?"

"No," Regulus mutters.

"I—what? No?" James sputters incredulously. "You better be lying, Regulus Black. If you don't trust me after all we've been through and all we've done together, then—then—"

Regulus arches an eyebrow at him. "I *don't* trust you. I don't trust anyone. Better that way."

That's not true, whispers a sinister voice in his head, and it makes a lump form in his throat. It's right, because Regulus trusted Evan, and it got him killed. Regulus trusted him, and he's dead now. Gone. Regulus killed him. Regulus—

"Oh, for fuck's sake," James says, sounding exasperated. He reaches up and shoves his hand through his perpetually messy hair. "That's shit, and we both know it. But sure, fine, stick to whatever suits you. Clearly you don't need to trust people to tolerate them, considering you've been with me for the last few days, so just do the same thing with the others. They really do have a plan

to get weapons, and they'll need help, so I think we should help them. The death eaters will be easier to stop if we have help, Regulus, and you can't deny it."

"I'm not denying it. I'm asking—and then what?" Regulus declares, raising his eyebrows at James, who falls silent. "Go on, James. What's next after that, hm? Say we do handle all the death eaters, and then it's just us and Juniper out there wherever she is. What do you expect to happen? Are we all just going to play as pacifists until…what?"

James doesn't say anything. He swallows, a strain around his eyes, and Regulus knows he's upset.

"Turning on each other isn't an isolated event only the death eaters know about," Regulus continues firmly, refusing to back down about this. Maybe it's harsh, but it's reality. "What do you think is going to happen when this little group is all that's left, *especially* if they have weapons?"

"They're not—"

"I know you think you're a good judge of character, James, but you're really not. You just see the best in people, and out here? That doesn't mean anything."

"Well, maybe you see the worst in people," James snaps, clearly agitated about this entire subject.

"And maybe that's necessary in a place where the worst is dragged out of people no matter how hard they fight it," Regulus replies calmly, gesturing around to encompass the entire arena as a whole. James gets his point. "I'm just—I need you to think about this, alright? Really, properly think about it. Best case scenario, we help them get weapons, and they help us deal with the death eaters; let's say, by some miracle, we all manage to survive. *And then what?* How long will it take before all water sources dry up and all the animals disappear, so we have no way to survive other than fight?"

James presses his lips into a thin line. "Regulus…"

"I know you hate it," Regulus says, his voice softening, because he can't help it. "I just need you to really think about this. Yes, maybe it's smart in some ways central to the present, but the future? It's a risk. A really big risk."

"I know that, alright? I do, but I just…" James heaves a sigh, his shoulders slumping. "Maybe it's

my bleeding heart, but I care about them. I—I want to help them, and if they help us at the same time, then brilliant. Let's…compromise."

"Compromise," Regulus muses, raising both eyebrows.

"Yeah, you know, we meet halfway for a solution we both can feel comfortable with," James explains, as if Regulus might not know the meaning of the word. Regulus does, even if he's never actually done it. "My parents do it all the time."

Regulus purses his lips. "Yes, well, they're married, James."

"Well, in another life—"

"Don't."

James grins, his eyes sparkling. "You already know, so I don't even have to. So, compromise?"

"I'm not very good at compromising, I don't think."

"Have you ever even done it?"

"No."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

Regulus rolls his eyes. "Shut up. My solution is that we leave and keep moving."

"That's not even *close* to a compromise," James mumbles, looking baffled. "Regulus, that's not—no. Just…no. Look, how about this? We help them, yeah? They have some sort of plan, so I think it's worth it to at least see what it is. And, if they're willing to help with the death eaters, we let them do that, too. But we don't have to stay. Two days, max. That's it."

"And then what?" Regulus challenges, yet again. "Because, if we do that, they'll have weapons. Which means that they'll be a threat. You think just because they're your friends means they won't kill you? Because they will."

"No one's killing anyone," James says wearily.

"We're quite literally in an arena to do exactly that," Regulus reminds him, and it makes his chest go tight to see how tired James looks as soon as he's said it. "What are you going to do? I mean it, James, what are you going to *do?* What happens when one of them thinks to kill you because you don't want to fight them and they think you're an easy target?"

"They won't," James whispers.

"You say that, but you don't *know,"* Regulus insists. "What will you do when it's just them remaining? Let them kill you?"

James looks away, his eyebrows furrowed.

A spike of sudden and visceral fear scrapes down Regulus' spine at the thought, and he doesn't know what he's going to say until the words are tumbling from his mouth, firm and sure, "I'll kill them if they try it. I'll kill them all before they ever got a chance to lay a hand on you."

James' gaze snaps to his, startlingly intense and full of wonder. There's surprise, too, but not as much as there *should* be, considering that *Regulus* is really fucking shocked by the announcement, as well as alarmed. Regulus' brain scrambles to make sense of that, but it can't, really. What an incredibly ridiculous and violent thing to say. He doesn't even know if he meant that, but he sure sounded like he did. Frankly, for a moment there, he'd sounded quite *dangerous,* actually.

James exhales an astonished laugh, reaching up to swipe his hand over his grin as he looks away, then down at his shoes. When he drops his hand, he's still grinning, and when he looks back up, his eyes are warm with delight. "Sure, love, whatever you say. Fine. There's our compromise, yeah? If anyone tries to kill me, you do whatever you need to do. Does that suffice?"

"I can work with that," Regulus admits.

"Brilliant," James chirps, clapping his hands together as he bounces on his toes. "In that case, let's

go."

Regulus heaves a sigh, but he does, in fact, go.

Chapter End Notes

starting out with wolfstar!!! the discussion on sirius' dissociative amnesia was so, so important. like, remus knew about it, in a way, but he didn't know all there was to know about it overall, and it's obviously not something sirius shares with just anyone, so it was a big show of trust. sirius TRUSTS remus, and that's so, so special to me <3

also lmaoooo, not sirius getting offended because remus just assumed that he'd been with people before. remus obviously didn't mean it in a bad way, but sirius is touchy about these things for obvious reasons. he has some issues with sex/pleasure that are addressed later, i assure you. remus is so respectful, though. mr. "five years ago, i would have fucked him by now" being like: okay, we never have to do anything, don't even worry about it, babe, im just happy to be here 😭😭😭 an icon!!!

i better not see any pandora slander for interrupting them. sirius has work to do anyway, and he can't just stand around and make out with remus, as much as he might wish to. don't worry, pandora redeems herself for interrupting later, plus she's so supportive, i love her to bits <3

and then jegulus...

well, they're clearly still struggling, but at least they're trying. or james is, at least, and he's sort of helping regulus do the same. it was nice to see them bickering again. lmaooooo james calling regulus a little nerd 😭😭😭 him and his "sad boy poetry" that's so mean, james STOP. he doesn't mean anything by it, he thinks it's adorable, but poor regulus wanted to sink into the ground and never resurface.

also "that's what you do when you're getting over your first—" no, no, finish what you were going to say, regulus. go on, we're listening SPEAK YOUR TRUTH, BABE!!!

also² "you made me feel" and james being like 😳 OKAY BUT FEEL WHAT? FEEL WHAT REGULUS TELL ME??? GIVE ME THE CHEATSHEET I WANNA DO IT AGAIN!!! FEEL WHAAAAT??? 😩😩😩 this himbo, i love him so much. like, he's aware that it's pointless, and he's still like: please for the love of god just let me sweep you off your feet i am trying SO HARD.

oh, and james just being like HI PETE 😀 wait why are you freaking out rn? because regulus is pinning you to the ground with his dagger to your throat??? stop complaining, how does it feel to live my dream? LIKE HIS CONFUSION PLS 😭😭 he really did not even see the issue at first. he was like: consider yourself lucky, what i would not GIVE to be you rn

but yes, jegulus has located the allies!!! we see more of them next chapter <3 not regulus threatening to kill them all if they so much as breathe near james wrong. he's

such a good boyfriend. james was batting his eyelashes and twirling his hair, as he should. can't even blame him, i would do the same thing.

side note: all the mentions of evan is just. devastating. like, yeah, he's dead (rip, and sorry to all of those who are in denial, it's okay babes, you stay in denial, he's just sleeping) but his presence in the fic will remain, so it's like...double the damage 😭😭

anyway, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died thus far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

i have to work a double-shift on this upcoming tuesday, so i won't be able to post. due to this, ill post on monday and take tuesday and wednesday as a break instead of the usual sunday and monday.

UPDATING ON MONDAY THIS TIME

MONDAY!!!!

yeah, im pretty sure you all got that, and if not, you'll just find the update on tuesday anyway lol. it's fine. see you all on monday <3

The Bridge

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!!!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to animal death (nothing explicit and for the whole arena thing)
-brief mention of preparing/cooking animals (very vague and not explicit at all, but still)
-references to implied child death (because of the whole arena thing)

that's all, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus can see why the others have survived in this cave. It's very hard to find, and even with how observant he is, he doesn't spot it until James actually points it out. There's some foliage put in front of the entrance to disguise it further, which James informs him is new.

As soon as they enter, Vanity is scrambling to her feet and shrieking, "James! You're here, you're back!"

Regulus watches her launch herself forward to hug him, which he takes with a laugh as he hugs her back. They actually look like they're squeezing each other tight enough to hurt, but neither of them seem to mind. Vanity is comically shorter and smaller than James, but he pretends like she's about to knock him over, teasing her about being so strong. From the side, where he's boiling water, Peter watches with a soft smile.

Irene and Mathias also share fond chuckles, but they're handling food at the moment—or what *will* be food—so he doesn't look at them very much. He's seen enough blood and death to last him a lifetime, at this point.

"What's this? This is new," James says, reaching up to gently run his hand over the artfully twisted hair on top of Vanity's head.

"Mathias did it for me." Vanity beams up at him. "They did a really good job, didn't they? It looks nice like this."

"Yes, very pretty," James tells her with what Regulus knows is genuine sincerity.

"I was really worried about you," Vanity declares, then hits him on the arm. "I thought you weren't coming back."

James rubs his arm with a wince. "No, I was. I promise I was. I just had to, er…" He glances over at Regulus, then clears his throat and gives Vanity a lopsided smile. "Well, I had to find him and bring him back with me. Got a little sidetracked."

"Oh, right, *Regulus,"* Vanity sing-songs, giving James a teasing look that makes him snort. She pokes him in the stomach, her eyes bright with laughter, and something about it—her youth and how sweet she is—makes Regulus ease up and calm down a bit, leaving him just slightly less on edge. "You had to go get your boyfriend."

Lovely. Even here, Regulus can't escape that assumption. At least no one is calling him *lover boy.* Though, at the thought, he feels his heart sink. Only one person ever called him that. He would walk around with that moniker printed on his forehead if it meant Evan was still alive to say it.

"Hey, Regulus?" Mathias calls eagerly, hopping to their feet to amble over with hope in their eyes. "Can I steal a dagger? Wait, that came out wrong. I mean, um. I just—I'm skinning the squirrel, and that's really difficult to do without anything sharp. I have—well, I have chipped stones, but a dagger would make it so much easier, and it'd be less messy, so if—if I could *borrow* a dagger—that's what I meant, *borrow,* not steal, obviously, because I will absolutely give it ba—"

"No," Regulus says, and Mathias snaps their mouth shut, their eyes wide. An uncomfortable silence settles in the cave, and Regulus sighs. "I'll just…help."

Mathias brightens instantly. "Brilliant. Come on, then. Irene is so good at it, but I absolutely *hate* this part. Actually puts me off eating, really, but…also I don't want to starve, so…"

Reluctantly, Regulus trails over to the side of the cave where Mathias leads him and Irene is already hard at work. He shoots James a narrow-eyed glare as he goes past, but James just grins at him. He mouths *be nice,* and Regulus flips him off, which makes James stifle a laugh before he focuses back on Vanity, eventually moving over to chat with Peter as well.

"Brought reinforcements, have you?" Irene asks with a grunt as Mathias and Regulus crouch down next to her.

"He has a dagger he's willing to use to help," Mathias says cheerfully.

Irene snorts. "Least he could do if he's showing up to eat with us." She raises her eyebrows when he scowls at her. "Don't look like that. You want food? Earn it. Looks to me like you have two daggers." She holds out her hand and holds his gaze without wavering. "No use in not letting someone else use the other one. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we eat."

"I'd rather starve," Regulus says stiffly.

"Prick," Irene declares bluntly.

Mathias coughs. "Okay! Let's just…get this done, yeah? You don't have to give up one of your weapons, Regulus, that's fine. We get it. I don't think I'd be eager to do that either. Thanks for helping, though. We appreciate it, don't we, *Irene?"*

Irene remains silent. Clearly, she doesn't appreciate it. They all dip into silence for a bit, though Regulus does help with his own dagger, because he's willing to do that, at the very least. Eventually, the silence is broken.

"Can I ask how you actually got them, though?" Mathias asks, glancing at him curiously. "The daggers, I mean. We know the river ices over at night, but the death eaters are always there, and you had them by the second day. If there's a way over—"

"There's not," Regulus murmurs, focusing on his hands and what they're doing. "Well, not a way that works, not really. I climbed over with—" He halts, his voice catching, and then he forces himself to keep going because Irene and Mathias both stop to stare at him, obviously picking up on the emotion in his voice. He clears it away by clearing his throat. "Rosier and I climbed a tree and used one of the limbs over the river to swing across. It was risky, but we managed it, except it didn't work so well on swinging our way back across. The branch broke and I got stuck on the other side. Don't recommend it."

"Noted," Mathias mumbles.

"And the, um—the spider?" Irene says, a shudder rippling through her body. Not a fan of spiders, clearly, and Regulus can safely say he's not either, after *that.* "How the fuck did you manage to survive that thing?"

Regulus sighs. "I let it chase me to the river, then tricked it into falling in."

"Oh, that's *brilliant,"* Mathias says, gaping at him in disbelief, eyes wide with pure wonder. "That thing was terrifying."

"I've had nightmares about it literally every night," Irene grumbles, her face twisting, and she squirms a little bit before making a frustrated noise and dropping what's in her hands to frantically pat up and down her own arms.

Mathias leans over and whispers, "She's terrified of spiders."

"Yeah, I got that," Regulus replies.

"Shut up, Mathias. *You're* scared of the dark," Irene snaps, and Mathias begins sputtering immediately.

Regulus falls silent, listening to them bicker, strangely soothed by the sound. It reminds him of… Well, Sirius and himself, honestly, back when they were younger and they'd get into arguments over the smallest things. They used to fight like cats and dogs, and Regulus finds himself missing it, oddly enough. Clearly, Irene and Mathias have that same sort of dynamic, and Mathias effortlessly falls into the younger sibling role, because they *are* younger, while Irene fits right into the older sibling role with ease.

Over in the corner, James is still with Peter and Vanity, which Regulus accidentally keeps an eye on. He doesn't mean to, if he's honest, but his eyes keep flicking over to them, watching James laugh and look more relaxed than he has in days. He's always shined in social situations, always the type of person to feed off the energy around him, rather than be drained by it. Regulus is on the completely opposite end of the spectrum in that regard, and he always has been. There's genuinely nothing more exhausting than a group of people, in his opinion.

"Hey, can you help me strip this, since you won't give up your dagger?" Irene asks, drawing his attention again.

"Fine," Regulus murmurs with no heat to his tone, because there wasn't any in hers. He may not like her, but he has no interest in provoking her. He helps her without a word.

James comes over at one point to crouch down behind him and start digging around in the bag, saying, "I'm taking the water canister to fill up, that way we can all share instead of repeatedly boiling water over and over. Clears up the fire to use for the food, too."

Regulus doesn't respond, but he doesn't protest, and when James leaves, Irene mutters, "Oh, so *he's* welcome to borrow your things." He glares at her, and she flashes him a broad smile. "Can't say I blame you, Regulus. I'd let him take whatever he wanted from me, too."

"Irene," Mathias says with a sigh.

"What?" Irene asks, laughing. "I *would."*

Mathias rolls their eyes, then gives Regulus a playful smile as they shake their head. "Please don't kill her in her sleep. I know she doesn't make it obvious, but she's actually a good person." They bust out laughing when Irene immediately swats them over the head. "Oi, watch the hair! If you get blood in my hair, Irene, I swear I'll—"

"What? You'll what, Mathias? Hm?" Irene cackles and proceeds to dive forward with both hands outstretched, trying to press her fingers into Mathias' hair while they yelp and scramble backwards, laughing along with her.

It sort of feels like stepping into an entirely different world, one he wouldn't haven't felt out of place in only a few days ago, at least not the way he does now. Where the sight of blood doesn't make him picture Avery's gushing throat, or Evan's bloodstained fingers, or Mulciber's chest split open. Where loud shrieks don't make him tense up instinctively, thinking of the scream James released when he was caught in a bear trap, or the sound of Mulciber screeching when Regulus chopped his hand off. Where a joke about murder is just a joke, and not a very real possibility that Regulus has to just—live with.

Irene and Mathias do eventually stop playing around, and they finish up with Regulus' help, so the food is ready to cook. The three of them go over to join the other three. Vanity is telling James how she managed to keep from freezing to death every night as the smallest person in the cave.

Not just the help from the fire, or even the body heat from Irene and Mathias crowding her, but she apparently found a colony of fiendfyre ants. They're Hallow-made and quite deadly if you get bit by too many of them, apparently. But she discovered some in the forest and managed to capture them, which she crushed up and boiled into water, then took sips of through the night in very small,

concentrated amounts to raise her core temperature. It has made her vomit and given her a rash (which she excitedly shows James by rolling up her sleeves), but it's what keeps her alive.

She's absolutely fascinated by the ants, of course, and James tries to hide his horror for what she's resorted to, but Regulus can see it anyway. Even Peter, Irene, and Mathias—who are all aware of this already—seem uncomfortable about the whole ordeal. Regulus thinks that it's smart, on an intellectual level, but on a *human* level, it's fucking awful. She's *fifteen.* She should *not* have to risk drinking lethal ant juice just so she won't freeze to death.

"We have a blanket," Regulus announces rather abruptly, completely interrupting Vanity mid-conversation. Everyone goes silent and stares at him. "You can use it."

Vanity blinks at him. "But I have my ant juice."

"You're using the blanket," Peter declares firmly, pointing at her and raising his eyebrows. "No more ant juice."

"But—"

"No."

"Peter," Vanity mumbles, "it's so *cool,* though. The way the venom affects the—"

Peter waves his hand through the air, looking exasperated. "No, no more ant juice. No more talking about ant juice. Regulus is kind enough to let you use the blanket, so you're going to use the blanket. James, tell her."

"It's a very nice blanket," James confirms, his voice soft. When Regulus glances at him, James is looking right at him, a tender smile on his face that Regulus quickly looks away from, feeling awkward and undeserving as always. "It'll keep you warm enough to make it through the night."

Vanity huffs. "But my ant juice was—"

"No more ant juice," Peter, Irene, and Mathias all announce at the same time, which makes Vanity

scowl. Peter huffs out a weak laugh and shakes his head. "It's the blanket from here on out, alright? Say thank you to Regulus."

"I'm not *five,"* Vanity snaps. "Fuck off. I'll drink my ant juice if I want to drink my ant juice."

"At least until too much erodes your internal organs to the point that they begin to shut down one-by-one in a slow, agonizing death," Regulus says, and Vanity blinks at him again, her lips tipping down. "But sure, drink your ant juice if you want to. I'll keep my blanket."

There's a long beat of silence.

"No, I'll—I'll use the blanket," Vanity mumbles. "Thanks."

Regulus just hums in vague affirmative and goes back to lazily flipping his dagger through his hands, entertaining himself with that rather than joining the conversations, save for that one moment. It takes a while for the talking to start back up again, but eventually, it does.

It's about mid-day, so they have quite a few more hours left in the day before it starts to get cold. The inside of the cave is obviously a sanctuary, and the others have made it as safe and comfortable as possible. They've put down padding from leaves and vines to sleep on, and they've stuck up leaves and mud to close any crack where wind can get in, also insulating the walls much the same way. Not the back portion of the wall where water trickles down, though.

Regulus can begrudgingly admit that it's a good show of survival on their parts. They're safe, secluded, and as warm as they can get.

The food from the traps today is apparently the most they've had so far. James has a bundle of berries in the bowl they got from Evan's bag, which he passes out and shares between everyone without hesitation. Regulus shakes his head when James offers him some, settling for his portion of the cooked meat, since it's more than enough.

It strikes him then that he didn't stop to think of getting Evan's supplies off his body, or even picking up Quinn's spear. From a survival standpoint, it's a huge oversight and moment of stupidity; but, again, from a *human* standpoint, the thought of actually doing that makes him uncomfortable. It's sort of nice to realize it, that their humanity hasn't escaped into the void the games seem so desperate to open up in all of them.

"So," Peter declares in the middle of the meal, "I was thinking we head out after we're all finished up. Regulus, you've been across the river, Irene and Mathias said; do they have food over there at all?"

"In the supplies, no doubt," Regulus says. "Mine came with dried meat and a granola bar. I haven't been back to take a proper look, but I'll bet the death eaters have all the food in one place for easy access. They also probably have what food their sponsors sent them."

"I would love something sweet right now," Mathias tells them with a wistful sigh. "Like, I dunno, cake."

"Yes!" James bursts out, utterly delighted. "You read my mind, Mathias. I've been thinking about cake since last night."

"Sweet, sweet icing," Mathias says dreamily.

"Soft, fluffy cake," James agrees.

"It would be in layers, of course," Mathias continues. "Like, at least four layers, and each layer—"

"—is a different flavor," James finishes for them, then proceeds to let out a truly indecent moan. "Oh, that sounds so good. I'm going to fucking *cry."*

"Please stop talking about cake," Vanity says mournfully, frowning at her meat. "It's making me sad."

"Right, no more cake talk. I don't even like cake, and I want cake right now," Peter mumbles with a sigh. "So, I vote we get weapons, then rob the death eaters of all their food."

"Everyone in favor," Irene declares, then puts her hand up. Mathias and Peter immediately join her, which prompts Vanity and James to do the same.

They all look at Regulus, and he sighs. "Sure, but how do you plan to do that, exactly?"

"The bridge," Mathias informs him. Regulus just stares at them. "We've been building a bridge to get across the river."

"As soon as it touches the water, whatever is in that river is going to pull it under," Regulus says.

Peter bobs his head. "Yeah, we thought of that, so that's why we made a raised bridge. The ends of it go up like ramps. It's quite big, so it's outside, but three people can carry it."

"We can't go across at night because the death eaters are there, but we're barely surviving without supplies and weapons," Irene adds. "They're away during the day, so it's our best option."

"And if they come across us on our way there?" Regulus asks.

"Well, that's where you and James come in," Vanity says, and she smiles sweetly when Regulus arches an eyebrow at her. James pauses mid-bite, staring at her with wide eyes. "You two have weapons, so obviously you two are the muscle."

"Such good muscle, too," Irene muses, grinning at James, who inhales his bite and proceeds to choke on it. Regulus rolls his eyes so hard that he nearly catches a glimpse of his own brain.

"We're joking," Vanity tells them with a giggle. "Obviously we've thought of this. Actually, Peter thought of this."

"That I did," Peter confirms, reaching over to pound on James' back and offer him water. James takes it with a weak thumbs-up. "So, the plan is to set a sequence of large fires to draw them away and keep them from the cave for long enough that everyone else can get in and out before they even knew we were there. Well, they'll find out, but we'll be long gone by then."

Regulus narrows his eyes. "Who's setting the fires?"

"That would be me," Peter says, taking a deep breath. He grimaces slightly. "It was my plan, so I should…do it, I suppose. I've gone out with Irene to set them all up already, so all I have to do is light them and run."

James looks at Regulus expectantly, and it's very fucking annoying that Regulus immediately knows what he wants. With a sigh, Regulus mutters, "I have matches you can use. Only six left, so don't waste any."

James beams at him.

"Oh, that would be helpful, thank you," Peter tells him with a broad grin. "It'll give me more time to run, that's for sure."

"You know, Pete," James starts, "if you don't want to—"

"Shut up, James," Regulus cuts in, glaring at him, and James shuts up. He clearly isn't happy about it, but he does.

Peter looks a bit disappointed that he's not getting out of this, but he still says, "No, it'll be fine. I'm sure it'll be fine."

"Yeah, it'll be fine," James agrees, like he can make it so if he simply believes it enough.

He should know that doesn't work by now.

~•~

James has to admit, the bridge is a bit of engineering genius. It's long, thin branches weaved together and stacked on top of each other with two ramps off the ends that will keep the wood raised above the water. Mathias did most of the work with help from the others, and it took them two days.

The agreement they all came to whilst carting the bridge through the woods was that Regulus and James would rotate out on carrying the bridge with the others so that one of them is ready with a weapon at all times, and the other three would rotate out whenever they got tired. James takes the first shift with Vanity and Irene, while Regulus and Mathias walk behind them, talking. Well, Mathias is doing most of the talking, but Regulus doesn't mind because he hasn't told them to shut up yet, and James knows he would if he *did* mind.

Peter has already gone off to reach the first fire point, and James would be lying if he said he wasn't worried about him. His stomach is cramping with anxiety. He really had wanted to offer to go in his place, but Regulus was quite clear about not allowing that, and James…gets why. He could practically hear Sirius screeching in his head, *don't you fucking dare, James; take that hero-complex I gave you and shove it.*

So, James didn't push the matter, for once. One of the main reasons other than the fact that he feels compelled to listen to the Sirius living in his head and also the Regulus right in front of him is that he doesn't fancy letting Regulus out of his sight.

"Come on, Vanity, take a break," Mathias calls softly, keeping their voice low.

"It's really not that heavy," Vanity mumbles, but she dutifully lets go when Mathias comes up to take over.

"Speak for yourself," Irene complains.

Regulus practically appears at James' shoulder. He doesn't even say anything; he just slides his daggers away and pokes at James' hand to indicate that he should let go. James' lips twitch against his will, and he's so helplessly fond. They swap places without a word, and James falls back with Vanity.

"I'm really upset about my ant juice," Vanity tells him. James is also really upset about her ant juice, but for an entirely different reason than her, so he keeps this to himself. "Not that I'm not grateful for your boyfriend offering your little love blanket; I am, I'm grateful, but—"

"Our little love blanket," James repeats, blinking rapidly.

Vanity holds her hands up in surrender. "Look, I'm not judging, alright? Just don't tell me the details so I don't have to think about it when I use it. Desperate times and all that."

"I—" James stares at her in bewilderment. "Vanity, there are no details. We used it to stay warm."

"Sure, James," Vanity says, her eyes bright with humor.

Chuckling, James shakes his head. "You're a menace."

"I think it's cute, really," Vanity muses thoughtfully, her lips curled up. "You and Regulus, I mean. In a very 'opposites attract, borderline doesn't make sense, but somehow makes so much sense' sort of way. Oh, and the 'best friend's brother, secret history, forbidden love' way also."

"Thank…you?" James says.

Vanity hums. "I read a lot of romance novels. I'm still waiting for my prince to come save me, you know."

"Oh, is that so?" James teases. "Have anyone in mind?"

"No," Vanity mumbles, but he can tell she's lying instantly because she ducks her head and kicks at the ground.

James snorts. "Yeah, you do. Go on, I won't tell anyone."

"Promise?"

"I'll take it to my grave."

"He doesn't know," Vanity whispers, reaching up under her sleeve to scratch at her rash distractedly, chewing on her lip nervously. "I, um. Well, you know Hodge…?"

"Hodge?" James asks weakly, his heart sinking. "The one who was reaped with you? That Hodge?"

Please don't let it be that Hodge, James thinks, but of course Vanity sighs and says, "Yeah, that Hodge. We're friends. Sort of. I mean, we're in some of the same classes because we're only a few months apart. He—he actually turns fifteen tomorrow. Maybe Marlene can convince one of the sponsors to send him something, like a treat, at least."

"Maybe," James says softly, his heart clenching. He doesn't know what else to say.

"But anyway, I get it," Vanity murmurs, gesturing between James and Regulus. "Well, sort of. I mean, only a bit. We didn't grow up together or anything, but he was always nice to me in school when we *did* talk. I didn't really have a crush on him until we got here, though. He's just been really, *really* kind to me. He found me crying once and sat down to talk to me, and I just—I know it's stupid, but I was thinking about how I've never even had my first kiss, and I probably never will. Then I thought it would have been nice if *he* was my first kiss, but that's never going to happen either."

James swallows thickly, stricken by how utterly devastating that is. She's never even had her first kiss. Fuck. "I'm sorry, Vanity. That's—that's really awful. I'm so sorry."

"You've kissed people, right?" Vanity asks.

"Er, yes," James admits.

Vanity frowns at him. "Am I missing anything?"

"Absolutely nothing," James replies immediately, sending a mental apology to everyone he's ever kissed, especially Ravi. They were a *brilliant* kisser. If they're watching, James hopes they understand why he's saying this. "It's mostly just—wet."

"Wet," Vanity repeats in disgust, her face scrunching.

James bobs his head. "Pretty much. Trust me, you're not missing out on anything."

"What about love?" Vanity says, blinking at him.

"Um," James replies awkwardly. He briefly wonders how he ended up in this situation and imagines that Sirius must be in stitches right about now. Clearing his throat, he proceeds to lie like his life depends on it. "You know, you're not really missing anything there either."

Vanity arches an eyebrow. "That's bullshit."

"No, really, it's—it's not even that…great." James struggles not to cringe. This goes against everything he is as a person, but to comfort her, he will do what needs to be done. "It's not like the books, you know? Most of the time, it's just…pain."

"Pain," Vanity repeats, frowning.

"Yeah," James murmurs, his gaze trailing helplessly towards Regulus. A lump forms in his throat. "Most of the time, it just *hurts.* When you think it can't hurt anymore than it already does, it'll find new ways to hurt worse."

"So…why?" Vanity mutters, sounding baffled, and she doesn't elaborate, but she doesn't have to. Why is everyone so obsessed with love? Why does everyone crave love? If it hurts so fucking much, why love at all?

James stares like a lovesick idiot at Regulus ahead of him as he sighs and softly says, "Well, that's the thing, Vanity. It's not exactly something you can escape. Once it's there, it takes a lot for it to leave, and sometimes it never does. Love's a lot like a disease that way."

"And sex?" Vanity asks.

"I—what?" James whips his head over to her, immediately startled out of his woes.

Vanity raises her eyebrows. "What about sex?"

"And you're done," James declares, reaching out to bonk her gently on the top of her head with the flat part of his hatchet. "No more questions out of you."

"Again, I am *fifteen,* not five," Vanity grumbles, swatting at his hand. "I'm just saying—"

"And *I'm* just saying no," James cuts in. "Here, hold my hatchet. Feel cool. Ooh, look, something shiny."

"That's not—" Vanity halts suddenly, distracted by something off to the side, for which James is grateful for at first, but then she turns and wanders away.

"Vanity? *Vanity,"* James hisses, tossing up his free hand before huffing and following after her. She's not going far, at least, just up to a tree a few feet away. When he catches up, she's crouching down in front of it. "Hey, don't just wander off like that, yeah? We need to stay behind the others. Let's—"

"Shut up, look at this," Vanity says excitedly, sounding thrilled in the only way she does about bugs. She lifts her hand to wave him over insistently. "James, *look."*

James clicks his tongue, but he moves over to crouch down beside her, blinking at the bug that's crawling slowly along the bark of the tree. It looks like some sort of bee, but really big; there's a bright bulb on the end of its body that shimmers in the pouch, like it would spill out in a neon pool of green glitter if it was busted. Hallow-made, he's guessing.

James tilts his head. "What's that?"

"Horcrux Hornet," Vanity breathes out, giddy. She reaches out and clamps down on James' arm. "Hallow-made. They're so cool, James. They're basically indestructible, and their venom replenishes at an unnaturally rapid rate. I have to get it."

"I feel like you do not have to do that," James says. "An immortal bug sounds like bad news, Vanity."

"Oh, yeah, it's lethal," Vanity agrees. "One sting causes excruciating pain, but death comes quickly. Less than a minute."

"Right. We're going," James announces, reaching for her arm.

"No, no, it's okay," Vanity protests eagerly. "I promise it's okay, James. Horcrux Hornets only respond to fear. They won't attack unless you're scared. So, you know, don't be scared, alright? They're harmless as long as you're not afraid, really."

"I just found out one sting will kill me, so you could say I'm a bit scared," James mutters.

Vanity huffs. "Then *back up.* I've got this." She shakes her head and reaches out carefully, cupping her hand in front of the Horcrux Hornet without hesitation. "Imagine being a grown man afraid of bugs. You're embarrassing."

"I—you know what?" James sputters, offended. "First of all, being afraid of bugs that can *kill you* is perfectly valid. Second, why do you even want the damn thing?"

"Because we can use its venom, obviously," Vanity murmurs, gently reaching out to nudge the bottom of the Horcrux Hornet, encouraging it to crawl into her palm. "They're really lazy creatures. Don't like flying much, because their wings are so sensitive that it hurts them every time they do it, but they will if they're trying to sting you. Fiendfyre ants are their only predator; that's the one thing that can kill them, because they essentially burn up from the inside out if they're bitten by them. But anything else? Doesn't work. Cut them in half, and they'll just grow back. Squash them, and they'll just reform. It's *fascinating,* don't you think?"

James grimaces. "Sure. Fascinating."

"Are you afraid? I'll stay back if you're afraid," Vanity says as she slowly stands up, holding the Horcrux Hornet to her chest like it's precious.

"I'm not *not* afraid," James says. She arches an eyebrow at him, and he cracks a weak smile. "I'm wary, mostly."

"Better to be safe than sorry," Vanity murmurs, holding her palm up. "Oh, she looks tired. She must have flown recently."

"She?" James asks.

Vanity hums. "Yeah, you can tell because her pouch is bigger. The males have smaller ones. What should I name her?"

"Um, Vanity, maybe you shouldn't—"

"What about Vespa? A little on the nose, but…"

"Vespa?" James asks.

"Because she's a hornet," Vanity says, looking up at him. When he continues to look confused, she rolls her eyes. "I am so disappointed right now. *Vespa,* James. It's the scientific name for hornets. How can you not know this?"

James opens his mouth, closes it, then shrugs helplessly and mumbles, "Sorry? Vespa is a great name. Really…suits her."

"It does, doesn't it?" Vanity agrees, giggling. She proceeds to lift her hand and gently dump the—Vespa on her shoulder, looking pleased. "There you go, darling. You ride right there, Vespa, take a little nap. Alright, James, let's go."

"Right," James mutters, shaking his head in a mixture of disbelief and wonder. Mere moments later, they're back on the path, catching up with the others.

"I want to tell Regulus about this," Vanity says, looking fucking ecstatic. "I bet he'll be willing to dip his daggers in Vespa's venom. If it's ingested or it hits the bloodstream, it's over. I know *he* won't be scared."

"I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Never."

James shakes his head with a small, fond smile as Vanity grins at him before rushing over to essentially shove Irene away from where she's holding onto the bridge so she can start chattering excitedly to Regulus, who blinks in surprise but nonetheless pays attention. Irene falls back with James.

"You let her get a bug?" Irene asks flatly. "A *lethal* bug?"

"I did try to stop her," James admits wearily. "You know how she gets about bugs, Irene. It should

be fine, I suppose, as long as we don't get scared."

Irene snorts. "Oh, right, because we're not in an arena specifically driven to put us in terrifying situations or anything, not at all."

James winces. "You may have a point."

"How do we get it away from her?"

"Don't be afraid of it."

"Failed step one," Irene mutters. "Can we kill it?"

"It's basically indestructible," James says.

"Lovely." Irene heaves a sigh and crosses her arms, shaking her head slowly. "Yeah, alright. Let's just…hope for the best. Maybe you can convince Regulus to get it away from her later. He doesn't look afraid of it, and I do *not* want that thing in the cave with us tonight. It'll break her heart, but…"

"An unfortunate, but necessary evil," James can't help but agree. One nightmare, and Vespa will be on the attack. "I'll talk to Regulus, but I can't guarantee anything. He only does what he's willing to do."

Irene hums, leaning over to bump their shoulders together with a playful smile. "I don't know. I think if anyone has a chance of convincing him, it's you."

"You are *severely* misinformed," James says with a snort, and then he clears his throat. "Um, Irene?"

"Yeah?"

"I just—I wanted to apologize if I hurt your feelings. In my interview, I mean. I—I didn't mean

anything by it, you know. You're a lovely woman, but I—"

"Oh, that?" Irene blinks at him, then chuckles, waving her hand like she's swatting a fly. "No, you're fine. Don't think anything of it. I just wanted to fuck, really."

James blinks. "Oh."

"Well, you know, possible death and all…" Irene shrugs. "I wanted to feel good before all of this, and you are a very, *very* beautiful man. I assumed we'd have fun together."

"I'm sure we would have," James teases, unable to help it, and Irene grins at him. "Sorry you didn't get to have your fun."

"Are you joking? I *absolutely* had my fun," Irene informs him with a snort. She waggles her eyebrows at him. "Let me tell you, Dylan and Peter are *very* thorough lovers."

"What?" James gasps, eyes bulging. "You and—wait. Wait, at the—did you—all of you at the—"

Irene's grin is downright *filthy.* "Yeah, we did. All three at the same time. That's how I spent my last night, and I have *no* regrets. Shame about Dylan, you know. He was… Well, the fact that he was good in bed isn't as important as the fact that he was a good person, but he *was* good in bed."

"I have so many questions," James admits. "I mean, how did the three of you even…?"

"Well, there are a lot of different positions if you—"

"No! No, I mean, how did you three meet up?"

"Oh, I snuck them into my suite," Irene says, waving her hand carelessly again. "Mathias helped, because they're brilliant. They distracted Frank, our mentor. Suppose he's finding out now." She glances around with a grin. "Sorry, Frank."

"Right, but you just—decided to have sex?" James asks, his eyebrows furrowed. "Like, um, did it

—did it mean anything?"

"No, of course not," Irene says. "I mean, it was lovely, don't get me wrong, but it was more… Well, it's just that we all knew we might die, so we might as well enjoy ourselves before, yeah? Sex doesn't have to mean anything, James. Not for everyone."

James feels his shoulders slump. "Right."

"Oh. *Oh,"* Irene breathes out, and her eyes are wide when he glances over at her. "James, did you and Regulus have sex on *your* last night?"

"What? *No,"* James blurts out quickly, immediately getting anxious, because it's not *technically* a lie (the parting gift took place the morning after), but it's close enough to one that he's absolutely freaking out already. "No, of course not."

Irene squints at him, looking bizarrely like she can see the inside of his brain. "But you *were* with him the last night, yes?"

"I—" James scrambles for a way to not respond to this, trying to think up a proper lie, genuinely sweating at this point. It's too late, though. Irene's face clears, and she *knows,* so of course James immediately caves. "It wasn't like that, alright? We just sort of…slept together. *Not* sexually, obviously. We, um. We…"

"Snuggled?" Irene teases.

"I mean, a bit," James mumbles, ruffling his hair and feeling ridiculously flustered just from the memory. It's so different from holding Regulus every night *here,* because he knows that comes from a place of necessity. But that night? Regulus did that on his own, because he *wanted* to.

"Wow." Irene shakes her head. "I genuinely can't even picture Regulus *snuggling* someone. James, you have to tell me and all the people at home. This is crucial information. Was he the big spoon or the little spoon?"

James tucks his lips in and mimes zipping them.

Irene groans and nudges him playfully, and they both laugh as they sway back and forth. "You're no fun."

"Stop fishing for details," James says. "He'd *hate* me if I said anything. Well, he already hates me, but he'd hate me more."

"I don't think he hates you at all," Irene replies.

James sighs. "No, he does. It's—I mean, I suppose it's not a secret now, really, but he definitely does."

"Mm, no," Irene says simply. "I think he likes you, actually. In fact, I'm quite sure he fancies you as much as you fancy him. Trust me, this isn't an unrequited love situation."

"No, but it is, though," James mumbles mournfully.

Irene smiles at him. "Really? Because he's looked back at us at least five times, and the poor thing is so jealous he can barely walk straight. I just *know* he's imagining slipping his dagger between my ribs right now. It's sort of funny, if I'm honest."

"What, really?" James blurts out, his head snapping up to look at Regulus, who isn't looking back at all. He's in the middle of talking to Mathias. "Irene, you lied. That's mean."

"Look at his hands," Irene whispers, moving closer and slipping her arm through James'. "He's gripping the bridge so tight it's like he's trying to break it. Wait for him to look back again and watch how pissed he gets that I'm touching you."

James can see that she's not lying about Regulus' hands. He's holding onto the bridge so hard that his knuckles are white, entirely bloodless. Still, "I really don't think he cares."

"Fancy a wager?" Irene asks.

"Terms?"

"I bet Regulus will turn and see us like this, then call you to carry the bridge to keep you away from me. If he doesn't, I'll be the one to tell Vanity she has to get rid of Vespa. If he does, it's on you to break her heart."

"Oh, he's definitely not going to do that," James tells her with a snort. "You're on."

Irene chuckles and sort of snuggles closer to him, leaning her head over on his shoulder. "We shall see. In the meantime, do you want to hear about how talented Peter's mouth is?"

"You know, actually, I really do," James murmurs. "It would keep me from worrying about him."

"Hey," Irene says softly, squeezing his arm, "I'm worried, too, but Peter is smart. He has a thirst to survive. He'll be fine."

"Yeah, but surviving is hard out here," James whispers.

"I know," Irene whispers back. They fall into heavy silence, strolling along together, and it's actually really nice to have her leaning against his side like this. Just a point of contact shared between friends, but that doesn't make it less comforting. James is much less touch-starved now. "Okay, here it comes. Regulus is about to look."

"How can you tell?" James asks, baffled.

"He's flexing his fingers, and it's been about forty-five seconds since he looked the last time," Irene explains.

James snorts. "You *timed* him?"

"What can I say? It's fun pissing him off. If he didn't dislike me so much, I would have tried to fuck him, too. You and him both. Oh, *that* would have been fun," Irene announces with a wistful sigh.

"Yeah, no, that would have never worked."

"Because he's jealous?"

"Because *I* am," James corrects.

Irene makes a quiet *huh* sound, like she's mildly surprised, but also not at the same time. "You know, I can see that for you. Well, at least you're both well-suited for one another." She hums and presses closer. "Here it comes."

Sure enough, Regulus glances back, just like Irene said he would. He's glaring, but he's always glaring, generally. James can't tell if he's jealous or not. Frankly, Regulus would have absolutely no reason to be jealous, because James genuinely forgets other people exist when he's around, and honestly? James has spent the last ten years rather stuck on him, so that's certainly not going to change now, and Regulus *knows* that, so there's no way he's—

"James," Regulus calls, coming to a screeching halt so sharply that he actually yanks on the bridge and makes Mathias and Vanity stumble a bit. "Stop fucking around. Swap. Now."

"Told you," Irene mutters under her breath.

"I'll be damned," James breathes out, astonished.

"Didn't I say?"

"You did. You absolutely did say."

"Never doubt me again."

"Right, but—I mean, maybe he's not *jealous.* Maybe—"

"James," Regulus snaps.

Irene stifles a laugh. "Oh, he's *seething* with it, just look at him. I almost feel bad for him. Almost. I bet if I kissed you on the cheek right now, his head would explode."

"I'm not taking that bet," James says.

"Because I'm right about him being jealous?"

"Because I'm not risking his head exploding. I'm rather fond of his head being firmly attached to his body."

"If that's the case, you might want to go swap with him. I can practically see the steam coming out of his ears," Irene tells him, sounding thoroughly entertained.

James clears his throat. "Right, yeah, I'll just—"

"Remember, you have to tell Vanity," Irene reminds him as he pulls away. "That was the deal."

"Lovely," James mutters with a grimace, but he dutifully nods before he starts over to the bridge.

Regulus doesn't even speak to him. He just continues to glare at him before snatching out his daggers and moving over to walk with Irene. James joins Vanity and Mathias in carrying the bridge. Every time he glances back, Regulus is flexing his fingers around the handles of his daggers like he wants to use them, and Irene is grinning like she knows it.

James huffs out an amazed laugh and keeps walking.

~•~

Regulus isn't entirely sure if the bridge is going to work. Not that it isn't well-crafted, because it is. It's sturdy, despite the fact that it's not very wide, just enough for a single file line of people to walk across and that's it. That's not the problem.

The problem, Regulus fears, is that it might not be long enough. The river isn't too wide, just about

the length of three grown men lying down, stacked head to feet. That alone is going to make the bridge difficult to get over the water, but if it falls short, then all of this is for nothing and Peter is out there risking his life for no reason.

When they get to the field they all started in five days ago, Regulus knows they're a little behind schedule. Peter's already lit the first fire, the smoke from it visible in the sky. The second isn't going yet, so they're not *too* far behind, but it definitely makes them pick up the pace.

"Alright, we have to do this carefully," Mathias says when they reach the edge of the river. They've stood up the bridge with James on the other side, holding it in place. It's quite tall, which is promising. "James, we're going to lower it *slowly,* as far as we can get. Don't drop it, or the ramp on the other side might break. Ready?"

"Ready," James assures them, nodding.

"Steady now," Mathias murmurs, grunting as they begin to let it slowly sink through the air.

It's a bit of an awkward process, like tipping over something very tall and trying to ensure it falls in slow motion. It involves a lot of balance and strength, but it's a two-person job, so no one can help them. Regulus can only stand back and stare at the veins on James' forearms, lightly covered in dark hair, and the bulging muscles from where he's straining. Why did he roll his sleeves up? *Roll them down, for fuck's sake,* Regulus thinks almost desperately, unable to rip his gaze away.

There's one moment where it seems like the bridge isn't going to make it all the way across, but then Mathias and James lift and *push,* and the bridge hits with a quiet thud. It rattles a bit, but it's there, just like that. Raised up above the water, a clear platform for them to walk across. No hands lift from the crimson river, but they all seem to be waiting for it.

Nothing happens.

"Brilliant," James declares cheerfully.

"We still have to get across," Mathias points out. They take a deep breath and set their shoulders. "Right, well, this was my idea, so I'll—I'll go first."

"Mathias," Irene says warily, stepping forward. "Why don't I go first, yeah? Just—just let me."

Mathias gives her a tiny smile, then shakes their head. "It's fine, Irene. I believe in my bridge. Wait for me to get all the way across before you follow, and come one at a time. No need to test weight restrictions. Vanity after me, if this works."

With that, Mathias turns and proceeds to start up the bridge, one careful step after the other. They're brave, that much is obvious, because they don't falter even on the way over the water. Everyone seems to hold their breath, but no pale hands raise up, and Mathias makes it safely across.

Regulus is inordinately relieved that it worked.

"Alright, Vanity," Irene murmurs, waving her over. "Careful now. Don't look down and don't stop."

Vanity reaches up to gently cradle Vespa, then starts her way across as well. She's brave, too, and she must not feel an ounce of fear, because Vespa doesn't sting her. She makes it across and whips around to grin at them, clearly pleased. She high-fives Mathias, who is also visibly pleased.

"Come on, Irene," Mathias calls.

"Time to see how the other side lives," Irene teases, then salutes James and Regulus with a wink before making her way over without so much as a stutter.

"Your turn," James says.

Regulus shoots him a *look,* but James just smiles at him. It's a sweet, boyish smile that makes Regulus want to put his hand to James' cheek and turn his face firmly away. With a huff, Regulus whips around and makes his way over the bridge next. It's structurally sound, at least, and it only rattles a little. He makes it over safely.

Scowling, Regulus turns and waits impatiently for James to follow. As always, he does. The moment he's safely on the ground, Regulus turns around and starts for the cave.

The death eaters have definitely changed things. As Regulus predicted, they do have all the

supplies and food set up in a corner for easy access, kept out in the open rather arrogantly. In fairness, it's not as if anyone could get to it during the day, and they're always guarding it at night, so no one could really come and take it, or so they thought. Their mistake is why they're being pillaged. Fucking idiots.

The weapons are mostly in the same place, though. It's clear that the death eaters picked over them, because most of them are strewn all over the place or left on tables.

Mathias immediately goes for the crossbow, and Irene has a sword in hand in seconds. Vanity bypasses all of that to go to the supplies, sorting through it until she lets out a sound of delight as she holds up what appears to be a pair of tweezers and a small, empty glass vial.

James goes over to join her, grabbing a bag to start filling with various things. Regulus does the same, uncomfortably aware of the fact that Irene and Mathias are still sifting through the weapons. He keeps a dagger in hand, just in case.

"What weapon do you think Peter will want?" Irene asks thoughtfully. "We've got a spear, a mace, and another sword."

"Spear," James replies. "It gives him a bit of long-range, but he can still use it close-range, and if he needs to, he can throw it."

Regulus squeezes his eyes shut, but that doesn't drown out the sight of Quinn's spear in Evan's stomach behind his eyelids. He takes a quiet, shaky breath and swallows down the lump in his throat, blinking hard and fast.

"Hey, Regulus," Vanity whispers, moving closer to him with a hopeful look in her eyes. "Can you help me?"

"With what?" Regulus murmurs.

Vanity proceeds to hold up Vespa where she has her clamped in between the pair of tweezers. "I need you to cut her."

Regulus blinks. "Cut…Vespa?"

"Yes, please," Vanity says. "It's okay, it won't hurt her. You see her pouch here, with the green stuff in it? That's her venom. She has no nerves in her pouch, so she won't feel a thing."

"Won't she…get upset?"

"No. She won't care as long as we're not scared."

"I mean, sure?" Regulus says slowly, eyebrows furrowed. Vanity beams at him, pleased, so he just goes with it. He knows she would never do anything to unnecessarily harm *any* bug, let alone the Horcrux Hornet she's clearly made her pet.

"Right. It doesn't need to be a big cut. Just a little one. Right on her pouch, go on," Vanity instructs, holding Vespa up.

Regulus frowns, but he moves forward and carefully pushes the tip of his dagger into the glowing, green pouch until it punctures through. He waits for something to happen, but Vespa shows no signs of agitation. Vanity releases a quiet squeal of delight and hovers Vespa over the vial. Gently, she squeezes the tweezers, and the venom slowly seeps out of the small cut and drips into the vial. Regulus peeks at his dagger, curious, but none of the venom gets on it like this.

"It's not a lot," Regulus comments, helplessly curious and a bit fascinated by the whole thing himself, honestly. The venom only fills the vial a quarter of the way.

"Yeah, I know, but watch," Vanity breathes out, so Regulus does watch. Vespa's pouch proceeds to knit back together, and more venom fills it in seconds. Again, Vanity squeals and bounces in place, grinning at him. "How cool is *that?"*

"Very," Regulus says, and he's not even lying.

"Do it again," Vanity encourages. "I want to fill the vial."

Regulus pauses, then shrugs. He does it again, faintly amused by how excited Vanity gets about it every time. It reminds him of himself the first time Sirius made him a dagger. When they were alone, Regulus didn't mind sharing how excited he was about anything, not at that age. He hasn't

had such childish excitement since he *was* Vanity's age. It makes something tender flare in his chest for her.

They repeat the process two more times before the vial is nearly full. Vespa remains completely unbothered throughout the whole ordeal, and Vanity occasionally informs her that she's doing so well. Regulus' lips curl up against his will.

"Oh, what the fuck?" James blurts out when he wanders over to see what they're up to. He sounds *appalled.* "Why are we stabbing Vespa? Can we stop stabbing Vespa?"

"If you're going to be a big baby about it, you can go," Vanity declares with no small amount of sass.

Regulus hums, glancing up at James with a smile. "Yeah, if you're going to be a big baby about it, James, you can go."

"I—" James purses his lips, putting his hands on his hips as he squints between them. "See, no, I don't like that at all. A few conversations with Regulus, and you're getting mean, Vanity. He's a bad influence. Don't listen to him. Stay sweet."

"I'm only sweet when it suits me," Vanity says dismissively.

"Smart girl," Regulus praises, and Vanity flashes him a grin.

James bites his lip, clearly struggling not to smile, and his eyes are so, so soft. He clears his throat. "No, really, can someone explain why Vespa is being stabbed and why she's just…fine with that? She's not even twitching."

"She doesn't know it's happening," Vanity explains with a long-suffering sigh, like she's so exhausted being surrounded by people who don't know about bugs the way she does. "All we're doing is taking her venom. It doesn't hurt her."

"So, you *are* dipping your dagger in the venom?" James asks, glancing at Regulus with a small frown.

Snorting, Vanity shakes her head before Regulus can even respond. "No, not at all. Vespa's pouch is too thick for that to work like this, and he's not pushing in far enough. It's fine, we'll do that later when we have more time."

"Vanity, what weapon do you want?" Mathias calls out.

"I have my weapon right here," Vanity calls back. "Vespa is my weapon, and she's all I need."

"James," Irene says firmly.

Blowing out a deep breath, James focuses on Vanity, who looks up at him with a frown. "Vanity, I'm sorry, I really am, but you can't keep Vespa. You need to get rid of her."

"I won't," Vanity protests, her eyes narrowing. She gently places Vespa in her palm and sits the tweezers down so she can close the vial, keeping it in her hand.

"You have to," James tells her apologetically. "She's far too dangerous to keep around, and we can't bring her back to the cave with us. There's too much fear in this arena, and any one of us could get hurt."

Vanity looks ready for mutiny. "We need her venom, though."

"We really don't," James says softly. "No one deserves to die in excruciating pain, no matter how quick it is."

At that, Vanity deflates a little bit. She looks at Vespa with very sad eyes, like she might start crying. Regulus frowns, then frowns right at James, genuinely unhappy with him at the moment. He softens, though, because James looks like he might cry right along with Vanity. She's utterly *crushed,* because he's right, and he's crushed right along with her.

"You can keep the venom you collected," James offers weakly, his eyebrows furrowed. "That way you can always have a bit of Vespa with you. I know it's not the same, but…"

"Can't I just keep her for a bit longer?" Vanity asks, looking up at him with wide, watery eyes. "No

one is afraid of her *now*. I'll just leave her behind when we go. Maybe she'll handle the death eaters, you never know."

James immediately gives in, because his spine is the consistency of a roasted marshmallow. "Yeah, that's fine. Keep her for now, but when we go, she stays behind. Deal?"

"Fine," Vanity mumbles, heaving a sigh as she gently puts Vespa on her shoulder. With that, she turns and marches off, clearly not pleased at the moment.

"Oh, she hates me," James says sadly.

"She's not the only one," Regulus replies, and he immediately regrets it when James looks even closer to tears than he did before. "Stop it. She doesn't hate you. She may hate that you were right, but you *were* right. You did the right thing."

"Yeah, but she's mad at me," James mumbles.

Regulus rolls his eyes. "She's fifteen. She'll get over it."

"You didn't," James says.

"That was different."

"How?"

"You weren't her first crush," Regulus tells him, hating the way the word fits in his mouth. *Crush.* So inadequate for what it really was, even so young. He *knows* what it really was, but he hates the truth even more. "That complicates things a bit."

James looks him up and down. Slowly. Then he says, "Yeah, clearly. I'm back to thinking you have unresolved feelings."

"Ah, more delusion," Regulus says flatly.

"You're obsessed with being mean to me," James declares, like this is a major selling point in his favor.

"Reparations." Regulus flicks his fingers. "Nothing more."

"Reparations?" James chokes out, laughing. "For *what,* Reg? Because I teased you a little when we were kids?"

Because you stole my brother from me, Regulus thinks, but he doesn't say it. *Because you made my heart flutter, and you're doing it again, and I hate you, I hate you, I hate you,* he thinks, but he doesn't say that either. *Because it's easier; you're going to die, and this is easier,* he thinks, and he'll never say that to anyone. He barely lets himself think it, slamming the thought down under lock and key and ignoring the rattle that begs him to open it and explore it further. No. There's no point.

"Reparations for having to be around you," Regulus says instead, which sums all of that up. Sort of.

"Ah, you'd miss me if I wasn't around," James teases, and then his smile falters. Just for a moment. Just a flicker in his expression. Regulus can't fathom the change, or why it's there, but James smiles again anyway. Like it never even happened at all. "Well, the joke's on you, love. Negging is wrong and bad and shouldn't work, but when you do it…"

James makes a silly *mm mm mm* sound like he's tasting something exquisite, and he kisses his fingers, which makes Regulus roll his eyes as he mutters, "You're pathetic."

"See? Like that. Fuck, it gets me *every time,"* James says with a theatrical shiver. "Oh, yes, please insult me more. You have me absolutely *hooked."*

"I wish that was sarcasm," Regulus tells him. "Like, genuinely. But you're not joking. Where is your self-respect?"

"Wherever you want it to be," James replies. "I am but a man lost to the charm of Regulus Black."

Regulus snorts. "You do *not* find me charming. I'm the least charming person on the planet."

"Mm, we're going to have to agree to disagree on that," James informs him, stepping closer and leaning his hand on the table of supplies so he can sway closer, smiling that smile of his. The one that's hard to look at. "I do wonder sometimes what it would be like for you to be nice. Sincerely nice, I mean. What if I didn't like it? Would that mean I have issues?"

"You have issues regardless," Regulus says.

James grins. "Yeah, that never gets old. You don't even know how to be nice to me, do you?"

"You're *so* funny, James. Funny and kind and handsome and just the absolute best all the time! You brighten every room you walk into, but that makes sense because you're the *sun,"* Regulus declares in an overly peppy voice, folding his hands together and tucking them under his chin as he smiles sweetly and bats his eyelashes.

"Fuck you, that was *awful,"* James wheezes, shaking with laughter as he shuffles forward, clearly entertained. "You're not even trying, Reg."

Regulus lets his expression drop and his hands fall as he rolls his eyes. "That's what you get for fishing for compliments. If you think *I'm* going to stroke your ego, you're a fool."

"Well, if you won't stroke my ego," James teases, "you could always try stroking my—"

"I will give you the Vespa treatment, James," Regulus cuts in, reaching forward to press the very tip of his dagger to the soft give of James' stomach.

"How's that saying go? No pain, no gain?" James raises his eyebrows and steps forward into the blade, forcing Regulus to draw back a bit so he won't *actually* stab him. The fact that James just trusts him to do that is infuriating, only more so because Regulus instinctively *does it.* "You're always so much sweeter when I've been hurt."

"Well, I'm not a monster," Regulus mutters under his breath, abruptly turning away to grab the bag and busy his hands. James is so close, and Regulus suddenly feels like he's fourteen again, which is not a sensation he's pleased with. Yeah, moving on. "Don't stand around doing nothing. We are on a bit of a time limit here, remember?"

"Hey, the second fire is burning," Vanity calls from the mouth of the cave, drawing their attention.

"Chop chop, people," Irene announces. "We're leaving as soon as the smoke from the third hits the sky."

Regulus gives James a pointed look. "You heard her. Get to it. Wouldn't want to disappoint *Irene,* now would you?"

James breaks out into a grin, which instantly gets under Regulus' skin, but he doesn't say anything. James just releases a huff of laughter, soft and exhilarated, and he grabs his own bag to start gathering supplies. He leans over to press their shoulders together, and Regulus wishes with everything in him that he had the power to pull away.

He doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

JEALOUS REGULUS JEALOUS REGULUS JEALOUS REGULUS!!! i am LIVING for regulus just quietly seething about the fact that james is all smiles and easy touches with someone else, until he finally just reaches the end of his rope and is like: ok they need to be separated Right Now 😭😭😭 he was so upset PLS. like, babe, what's the matter? any particular reason you're annoyed? no?

meanwhile, james is completely oblivious to it until irene points it out lmaoooo. she's a real one for that! irene my beloved <3

actually, i love this whole group so much. i know they're basically acting as if they're not all technically in a death arena, but it's kinda one of those Heavy Subjects that you just don't really talk about until it becomes a more primary issue. they're ALL avoiding reality, and i can't blame them. james legitimately just found the people who don't actually want to kill anyone and went: ah, yes, These People Are My Allies, which if you think about it, that was kinda smart of him. also stupid, but still.

regulus so obviously is not a group person, which i totally get. i, too, sort of fade in the background and go quiet around people i don't know very well. it was sweet of him to offer the blanket and give peter his matches, though. like, he's not TRYING to be a prick on purpose. he's just a grumpy little shit. i love him <3

and vanityyyyy!!! she's lovely. i adore her so much. her and james crack me up, because it's very much an older brother/younger sister dynamic, which i find absolutely hilarious. also, the fiendfyre ants and the horcrux hornet was so exciting to introduce because they play a pretty big role in the fic overall. but the fiendfyre ants

were how vanity survived the cold nights, for those of you wondering how that worked!!!

so basically, this chapter was overall not so bad. had some humor, some flirting, some jealousy, a bit of angst as well. i am forewarning you now that the next chapter is rough. it was the one that was hardest for me to write, so keep that in mind. there's a two day break before it gets here, though. idk if that's better or worse, but it is what it is.

anyway, let me do numbers:

tributes remaining: 11
tributes who have died thus far:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
eight unnamed/unknown others

i won't be posting again until thursday because i have to work a double shift tomorrow and i work on wednesday. we'll go back to regular schedule after that!

UPDATING ON THURSDAY

bye everyone, and thank you, as always!!! <3

Massacre

Chapter Notes

hello, everyone.

warnings for this chapter:

-depictions of violence
-depictions of injury
-depictions of murder/death
-depictions of children/minors dying (mostly brief, but not as background as it has been up to this point)
-depiction of a mercy-killing
-mentions/descriptions of blood
-depiction/description of a panic attack (mostly brief)

this chapter is, quite frankly, very rough. it's very fast-paced, and a lot happens very quickly, with basically no break once it starts. i highly recommend reading this while alone and where you can squeeze something soft and cry in peace. i also implore all of you to please, PLEASE be mindful of the warnings and don't hesitate to check the more in-depth warnings in the end notes of the chapter, and also just—don't read if it's best for you not to. that's perfectly valid.

take care of yourselves first, always.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sirius has known from a very young age that a good plan is dependent on three factors. Preparation, execution, and each individual variable in aforementioned plan. A *good* plan has no such thing as unforeseen circumstances, but all variables in a good plan are prepared for unforeseen circumstances anyway, and they execute the plan in spite of them.

This? This is a bad plan.

The preparation is good, no doubt. They set up the fires perfectly. The bridge is well-built. They all have their roles, as well as their rendezvous points.

The execution is even going well. James, Regulus, Vanity, Irene, and Mathias do make it to the cave and do as the plan dictates by absolutely cleaning the death eaters *out.* Even Peter is sticking to the plan, though in his nerves he has sped up the process a bit, lighting fires too soon and running too hard to get to the next one, which doesn't give the others much time. Sirius can't blame him for that, really. He's undoubtedly afraid out there on his own, wanting to get everything over and done with as soon as possible.

The problem is all the variables. They didn't properly consider them all, even from the beginning. The plan could have been ruined before it ever got started if the group on the way to the cave just so happened to cross paths with the death eaters, and it was pure luck that kept that from happening, at least until Peter lit the first fire to get the death eaters' attention.

The death eaters are a very important variable, and Sirius is worried because no one really gave much thought to them in the unforeseen circumstances that they showed up. They're all counting on the death eaters to be stupid and bloodthirsty enough to follow the fires, and fortunately for them, that does seem to be the case. Somehow, the plan is working, despite the fact that it's not a very good one by his standards.

"Sirius, m'boy," Slughorn says, coming to a stop next to him with a broad smile. "Enjoying the games this year, are we?"

Obviously not, you fucking idiot, Sirius thinks, but he rips his gaze away from watching the screen to smile at Slughorn as diplomatically as possible. Slughorn has hardly left the gamemaker room, so Sirius has barely seen him at the watch parties, but with the dwindling numbers in the arena, he has a bit less work to do. Less lives to fuck with. Less chaos to cause. Besides, the ones in the arena are clearly capable of getting into trouble on their own today.

"They're certainly more intense this year than the one prior," Sirius replies, dipping his head and raising his glass in an unspoken toast to Slughorn, because he's not above buttering him up a bit, if that would help James and Regulus.

Slughorn chuckles and glances at the screen, clearly pleased with the praise and proud of his work. "I have to say, I owe a portion of the good reviews to your tributes, Sirius. The people are quite invested in their blossoming romance. May I ask how you feel about it?"

"Ah," Sirius says softly, raising his glass to take a careful sip and buy himself more time. He has to tread carefully here, as difficult as it is to do with such personal matters. He can't just say that he hates it, purely because it's not everyone else's *business;* at the very least, James and Regulus deserve their privacy, regardless of Sirius' feelings on the subject. He doesn't really *have* feelings on the subject, though, quite frankly. He cares more about Regulus and James' survival than their love lives. Still, he can't say that, so… "Well, a best friend only wants their best friend to be happy; a sibling only wants their sibling to be happy. I can't deny that I appreciate that they take such comfort from one another."

"Well said, m'boy," Slughorn muses thoughtfully, watching the screen with mild delight. It takes him a second, but then he looks at Sirius. "You know your brother well, Sirius. I must ask, what

holds him back? He's very resistant to James. I've worked out that some of it is just his personality, but he never really breaks past whatever blocks he has up. Sometimes it seems he has feelings for James, yet at other times it seems as if he would kill James just to get away from him. It's very confusing for the viewers, you know."

Sirius clears his throat. Again, he has to be careful. "Yes, a lot of that is just Regulus' personality, as you said. Isn't it more gratifying that way, though? That *will-they, won't-they* everyone is so keen on. Keeps them…hooked."

"Mm, yes, but with no pay off, there's just disappointment, Sirius," Slughorn says in audible disapproval. "I do not intend to leave *any* viewer disappointed, so what is it, I wonder? What will it take to break through to Regulus? What push does he need, and how can we facilitate it?"

Sirius briefly pictures shoving his wine glass down Slughorn's throat, stem-first, slowly and painfully. He indulges in the violent fantasy for a moment, fingers twitching around his glass, and then he forces himself to exhale as he banishes the images. It's just *sickening* how casually Slughorn is talking about controlling lives, outright asking Sirius to give him advice on how to better control his brother to get the results he wants. And Sirius can't just beat the shit out of Slughorn for daring to think he's entitled to *anything* involving Regulus, or even James, for that matter.

All he can do is play this smart and try his best to make this easier for Regulus—and James—because Horace Slughorn is missing some very vital information, and it's that Regulus only does what he's willing to do. If there's one thing Sirius knows for sure about his brother, it's that. As far as he can tell, there's very little that would push Regulus to be willing to do what the Hallows want from him, and frankly, the last thing Sirius wants is for it to reach that point.

So, Sirius clears his throat and says, "Well, what Regulus really needs is—"

"Sirius," Marlene hisses, abruptly rushing up to stand next to him and clamp down on his arm. Immediately, Sirius and Slughorn both simultaneously focus back on the screens, abandoning the conversation in favor of watching.

It becomes apparent what she's worried about instantly. The miniature map in the corner displaying every remaining tribute's position makes it very fucking clear that something is about to go terribly, terribly wrong. The death eaters may be bloodthirsty, but they're not as stupid as they need to be for this plan to be foolproof. Peter is just now reaching the third fire point, but the death eaters are right behind him, following his trail and only seconds away from reaching him.

Sure, they fell for the trap, but not for long enough that they didn't realize they were being baited. The thing about being bait is that it's too fucking easy to get bitten.

Sirius feels his heart drop, darting his gaze back to where the screen shows James and Regulus still helping gather food and supplies with Irene and Mathias. Vanity, in a fit of teenage angst and fury, has boycotted helping with all the pillaging in favor of sitting outside with her pet bug, clearly upset that she's going to have to leave it behind. The five of them are safe for now, but the third fire point isn't that far from the cave, so if Peter doesn't light it, they won't know to leave, and the death eaters might make it back before they're gone.

It'll be a massacre.

"Come on, come on, come on," Sirius chants under his breath, watching desperately as Peter fumbles for one of the matches, breathing hard. His hands are shaking.

"Shit," Marlene whispers, "he's not going to make it."

"No, indeed he's not," Slughorn agrees, sounding thrilled.

It's true. Peter is not going to make it, which becomes obvious the moment the death eaters come barreling through the trees, essentially startling him so much that he trips backwards and drops the matches before he ever gets one lit.

Sirius holds his breath, waiting for Peter to at least attempt to dive for the matches, because if he's going to die, he could still help his friends. If it was Sirius in that situation, that's what he would do. James, too. Regulus…? No, he'd probably run, and really, Sirius can't exactly think of him as a bad person for that. It's about survival, right?

It turns out that Peter is more like Regulus in this scenario, because he turns and runs without a split second of hesitation. Sirius reaches over and grabs Marlene's hand, the both of them squeezing tight as they watch in tense silence. Maybe it's ridiculous, but Sirius finds himself thinking *go, Peter, run.* He hopes he gets away, because if he doesn't, he's going to suffer a really painful death at the hands of those chasing him.

Peter does not get away. Willa shoots him with an arrow that lands in the back of his leg, sending him tumbling to the ground with a shout. He scrambles to rip it out, trying to get back to his feet, but the death eaters reach him first.

Bernice is on him in seconds, launching herself forward to punch him in the face so hard that he hits the ground again. Peter scrambles around on his hands and knees, then grunts when Axus kicks him in the side. Willa joins them, as well as Bernice, and they all start beating Peter right into the ground while Hodge hovers on the edges, knife in hand.

Sirius can see Marlene's face screwing up at the violence, but he keeps his own neutral, especially with Slughorn so close. It's grotesque to watch, as always. Peter is getting the same treatment that Dylan got at the very start. Simply beaten to death. Even with weapons, the death eaters see an easy target and decide to make it hurt first. They know how to put on a good show; they know what the viewers want to see.

Peter is curled up on his side, groaning and crying, when Bernice abruptly announces, "Alright, alright, that's enough. I'll kill him. He's from my district, after all."

"Bernice, please," Peter chokes out, face swollen and bloody as he holds up one shaking hand and feebly tries to crawl away from her. "Please don't. Wait. Just—just wait. *Please,* you know me. You—you—"

"No hard feelings, Peter," Bernice says, swiveling her sword in her hand as she moves forward. "You chose your side, and you'll die for it. You have nothing to offer me."

"No, no, please," Peter begs, gasping for air. "I'm sorry. Bern, I'm sorry. What do you want? I'll give you anything. *Please."*

Bernice snorts and raises her sword. "The only thing I want is Regulus Black and James Potter *dead,* and you're certainly not going to be able to give me that."

"Wait!" Peter blurts out frantically. "Wait, I—I can give you that! I know where they are."

"What?" Bernice asks, pausing to stare at him.

Sirius' heart stops in his chest. No. No, not this. *Peter, no, don't you fucking dare,* he thinks, panic immediately flooding his nervous system until he's suddenly shaking.

Peter is silent for a long moment, then he swallows harshly and rasps, "I know where James and Regulus are. I can take you to them. Just—just please don't kill me."

Slowly, Bernice lowers her sword. "On your feet, Pettigrew." Sirius watches as Peter slowly, shakily pushes to his feet, barely able to stand up straight and limping on his bad leg. Bernice points her sword at him. "Start walking."

Sirius struggles to breathe, because without hesitation, Peter does exactly that. He starts walking. Slow, but steady. Leading them right to James and Regulus.

"Well," Slughorn announces, "this is about to get interesting."

~•~

"Still no smoke?" James asks as Irene comes back over from the mouth of the cave.

"Not yet," Irene says. "Maybe he's trying to give us more time?"

James glances over at Regulus, who has his lips pressed into a thin line. He looks uneasy, and James can't help but feel the same way. They've all lost track of time, between worrying about Vanity and going through everything in the cave, as well as packing supplies and food. They were relying on Peter's fires to signal them, and now it's starting to feel like they've run over on their time a little *too* much.

"And Vanity?" James mutters.

Irene sighs. "Still sitting outside with Vespa. She's fine, just a little upset. She'll be ready to go when we bring out the bags to her, I'm sure."

"We're not going to be able to carry all of this," Mathias announces with a frown as they stare at all the bags they've stuffed full of supplies and food.

James grimaces, because they're right. Between the five of them, they can carry *maybe* two bags a piece while still carting their weapons with them, and Regulus already has a bag of his own. There

are fifteen bags in all, including Regulus', which means they'll have to leave five bags behind. That's enough for the death eaters to survive on, which is counterproductive to what they're going for here.

"We'll drop the extra in the crimson river," Regulus declares, glancing around at everyone expectantly.

Mathias bites their lip. "That's such a *waste,* though."

"Yes, but it's better than leaving them behind for the death eaters to use," Regulus points out.

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Irene says wryly, "but I'm with Regulus on this one."

"What if we made two trips?" Mathias asks.

James shakes his head. "Too risky. We're already pushing it now. I think—I'm worried we're running over the time limit. I really think we need to go. Now."

"What about Peter?" Irene demands. "He hasn't lit the last fire, James. Why wouldn't he—"

"There was no cannon, so he's still alive," Regulus cuts in, and James is thankful for how rational he's being right now, because James himself is so anxious and worried that he feels like he might vomit. "Something could have happened that kept him from making it to the last fire, but there's a chance that he's fine. Maybe he went back the cave to hide, which means it falls on us to get the fuck out of here."

"Regulus is right," James agrees. "We need to leave. Grab the bags we're tossing and—"

"James!"

The scream from Vanity outside makes them all freeze in despair, because she sounds downright *terrified,* and then they're all running for the cave entrance at the same time, weapons in hand and bags forgotten.

James is immediately horrified by the scene that greets him outside. Willa is dragging Vanity by the hair across the bridge while she struggles, and on the other side are the rest of the death eaters, as well as a beaten Peter. He's on the ground, flat on his back with Bernice holding him down with her boot to his chest. He isn't moving.

"Stop *struggling!"* Willa screeches. "Fuck! If—if you knock us off this damn bridge, I'll—"

"Let me *go!"* Vanity snarls.

They're all running. Of course they are. Desperate to reach Vanity before Willa yanks her to the other side of the bridge. They don't manage to make it in time. James watches it as if it happens in slow motion; Willa drags Vanity all the way across and stumbles from the weight as Vanity fights with all her might to get away, and Willa lets out a quiet yelp from how close to the river she is. She sounds scared. Vespa must think so, too, because she abruptly flies up from Vanity's shoulder, where she was peacefully resting, almost docile despite the fact that Vanity must be so scared right now.

And yet, Vanity isn't the one Vespa stings. Instead, Vespa flies right over to Willa and stings her, which causes her to release a scream so shrill and so full of pain that there's no doubt in James' mind that Vanity wasn't lying about the agony of a Horcrux Hornet's venom. Willa reflexively tries to squash Vespa where she stung her in the arm, even while tripping backwards. She goes down, still screaming when she hits the river with a splash, and hands immediately raise up to drag her and Vespa under, abruptly cutting off her shriek.

"Vespa!" Vanity shouts, scrambling forward, only to cry out when Bernice surges forward from Peter to grab her by the hair and continue dragging her back.

The cannon goes off.

"Yeah, that's right, Black. Come and get her," Bernice calls, fully just tossing Vanity to the side as Regulus sprints right across the bridge. He's the fastest. Of course he makes it first. Irene is right behind him, and James is right behind her, with Mathias bringing up the rear.

Regulus doesn't even hesitate when he makes it over. He slams into Bernice so hard that they both go to the ground in seconds. He fucking *flattens* her, but Bernice fights back, and she fights dirty. She yanks on his hair, punches and kicks and bites, and Regulus fights back just as hard.

Irene makes it over next, and she goes right for Axus, who is rushing over to help Bernice. She doesn't hesitate either, slashing out with her sword across their leg, which makes them shout and stumble to the side. Axus whips around, their hook in hand, and they swing out expertly to catch the blade in the curve of their hook, twisting and *yanking* to snatch the sword right from Irene's hands. Irene takes it in stride and fully just throws herself at them until they're both just rolling around on the ground with yelps and curses.

The thing is, the death eaters are outnumbered now. It's just Bernice and Axus, because Hodge clearly isn't going to do anything. Or that's what James assumes as he pounds over the bridge, his heart in his throat. Because Hodge has never done anything before, so James doesn't even *think*—

"No, no, Hodge, please," Vanity chokes out, trying to crawl backwards as Hodge stoops down over her. Even from here, James can see that his eyes are wide with fear.

"Kill her! Fucking kill her! She killed Willa, and she'll kill you next, Hodge!" Bernice bellows, grunting as she slams Regulus' head back against the ground.

"No! Hodge, *don't!"* James shouts, running as hard as he can, making it to the other side in just enough time to watch Hodge slit Vanity's throat.

Vanity collapses back, making a horrible gurgling noise, and Hodge gasps as he stumbles to the side, dropping his knife. James goes barreling over, finally reaching them. He doesn't mean to do it. That's the thing. He just shoves Hodge further away, not even aware of his own strength in his state of panic, and—and Hodge is so small, he's only fourteen—

James doesn't know what he's done until there's a splash. His head whips around as he hits his knees by Vanity, and he only gets one glimpse of Hodge in the water before the hands are dragging him down, just like Willa. James sucks in a sharp breath, left reeling from the sight and the realization that he just mindlessly pushed Hodge into the river.

He would have turned fifteen tomorrow.

It takes a minute, even longer than Willa—likely due to the fast-acting venom from Vespa—but then the cannon sounds, leaving Hodge eternally fourteen.

Another choked noise snatches James' attention back to Vanity. She's staring up at him in pure fear,

throat coated with blood, some bubbling up from her mouth. James makes a weak noise and shakily cups her throat with his hand, his eyes blurring with tears as he lifts her up a little to cradle her head against his legs. She tries to speak, but no words come out.

"Shh, it's okay. You're okay," James whispers, his voice cracking. A wet breath escapes him, his chest feeling like it's caving in. "You're—you're going to be—"

Vanity's eyes glaze over, and the cannon sounds. She's limp against him, no pulse in her throat, no breath causing her chest to rise and fall.

"No, no, I'm—I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. Vanity, I'm—" James chokes off because he can't speak through his own tears. He ducks his head forward, sobbing over her helplessly.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

She never got her first kiss.

She never got to fall in love.

She never got to go home.

Her prince never saved her.

Her prince killed her.

Her prince is dead.

James feels something within him shrivel and die right along with her, like something inside him has broken with a harsh *snap,* and it'll never heal the right way again. He clutches her closer to him and weeps through gasping breaths, the world around him seeming to have no meaning at all.

Vanity is still holding the vial of venom, the last piece of Vespa she got to have. It's lying in her gently-curled palm, bright and shimmering green. With trembling fingers, James reaches out to take it from her, because that's all he'll get to have of *Vanity.* He clings to it with fingers slick with blood, burying his face in her hair, rocking her back and forth.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

Sobbing.

~•~

Regulus spits out a mouthful of blood and swings his elbow at Bernice's head, but she manages to catch it and slam his arm down on the ground. Her other forearm presses into his throat, leaving him gasping hoarsely as he fumbles for his dagger and tries to throw her off at the same time.

It doesn't work.

Bernice presses harder, and the more Regulus struggles, the weaker he feels. It gets difficult to breathe, and his vision starts to go in and out, black spots dancing in front of his eyes as the world warps out of focus. He tips his head back, mouth opening and closing, in desperate need of oxygen that he's just *not* getting. His head is pounding, throbbing, and he can't really feel all his limbs properly. Is this dying? Is he—

Without warning, Bernice is snatched right off him, and Regulus immediately sucks in a deep breath. He chokes on it, coughing and curling up on his side as he reaches up to cradle his throat. In front of him, he can see his savior.

Peter.

Honestly, Peter can't really do much with how hurt he is, but he puts up a valiant fight. He punches Bernice in the face and manages to dodge one of her hits, but it doesn't take her very long to lash out at what looks like an injury on his leg. He goes down to his knee with a grunt, which gives her time to dive for her sword that Regulus had previously wrestled from her.

Peter can clearly tell what she's planning to do, because he hurries to get back on his feet and starts off in a limping run. Frankly, Regulus is just grateful for the time that Peter gave him. It allows him to catch his breath and slowly crawl to his feet, finally fumbling for his daggers. Peter is steadily going right for the forest, and Bernice appears agitated enough by him that she can't seem to decide if it's more tempting to follow him, or stay here and keep fighting.

Bernice whips her head back around to look towards Regulus, her chest heaving and her sword gripped tight. He can practically see the cogs working in her brain; they're severely outnumbered right now. It's just her and Regulus, because Mathias and Irene are keeping Axus busy. At the moment, Regulus doesn't know where James is, can't see him from this angle, but he'd heard the cannons and James shouting Vanity's name. He can take a guess. He doesn't let himself think about it, not yet, not now—but he knows.

If he listens hard enough, he can hear James weeping, and the sound makes him flinch, so he doesn't listen.

"Axus, *retreat,* you idiot!" Bernice shouts, and then she whirls around and starts sprinting for the forest in the same direction that Peter went in, except Peter is already gone.

Regulus goes still, eyes narrowing as he raises his dagger, tracking her as she runs in a zigzag pattern. But it *is* nonetheless a pattern he can follow, and he tugs his hand back, ready to let his dagger fly. He's going to hit her. He *knows* he's going to hit her, which is why it's genuinely infuriating when he's distracted by the sound of Mathias' horrified shout.

Grinding his teeth, Regulus lets Bernice go, choosing instead to whip around and see what's wrong. Axus and Irene are *going at it,* and it's fucking brutal. Axus' hook is buried in Irene's side, but she's not letting that stop her in the least. She just tugs it out, carelessly tossing it aside as she launches herself forward again; the wound isn't deep, or fatal, so she should be fine. Behind Axus, Mathias raises their crossbow.

The following sequence of events is just a tragedy everyone is too late to stop. Axus grabs Irene and whips around with her in front of them at the same time that Mathias shoots.

Mathias doesn't miss.

The bolt lands right where they aimed, except it wasn't Irene they were aiming for when they took the shot. It's Irene that releases a choked, wheezing noise as the bolt buries itself in her chest. Mathias' eyes widen, and they drop their crossbow.

"No. No, wait," Mathias breathes out. "Irene? I—I—"

Cursing, Regulus flings his dagger right at Axus, and it lands in the side of their arm, making them yelp and flail backwards. Irene stumbles forward into Mathias' arms, and Axus whirls around to see Regulus. Much like Bernice, they seem to realize what shit they've landed themselves in, and they start backing up slowly, eyeing Regulus warily. They leave the dagger in their arm and start backing up faster when Regulus draws out his last one and holds it at the ready.

"Help. Regulus, *help me,"* Mathias pleads, trying to hold Irene up, tears in their eyes. "Please. I—I need help."

"Get her across the bridge, *now,"* Regulus orders, moving over to reach down and scoop her legs up. Axus is still backing up, watching, clearly wary about being left alone.

Regulus will kill them if he has to, but everything is moving so fast, and Irene is the current priority. The bolt is sticking out of her chest, and she grips it through clenched teeth, but she wisely doesn't remove it as they carry her quickly over the bridge. Regulus still has his dagger in hand, and he keeps a check behind him; Axus is closer to the woods, a bit of a distance away, but they've stopped backing up. They're looking up at the sky where a Hallow heli-carrier is flying over them, making trees sway and sending a gale across them.

Irene is placed gently on the ground, leaning back against one of the poles as she takes short, labored breaths and cradles the bolt impaling her. Again, Regulus glances back to see where the heli-carrier is going, his heart dropping when he spots James on the ground with Vanity sprawled across his legs limply, cradled in his arms.

"I'm—I'm so sorry," Mathias gasps out, drawing Regulus' attention back to the matter at hand. "Irene, I didn't—I'm *sorry,* I—I never meant to—"

"S'okay. It's—" Irene clenches her teeth and shakes her head, reaching out with a shaking hand to thread her hand into Mathias' hair, tugging their head forward until she can press both of their

foreheads together.

They both linger there for a moment, and then Mathias pulls back. A look passes between them and Irene that somehow, despite everything, makes Irene give them a watery smile.

"No," Mathias whispers. "Please. Irene, *please."*

Irene coughs. "I'm not—you know I'm not going to make it, Mathias. Even with the supplies here, it's not—" She lets out a wheezing breath, grimacing. "It won't be enough."

"I didn't *mean to,"* Mathias chokes out, tears spilling out of their eyes, raising one hand to press the back of their hand against their mouth as they break down crying.

"I know. I know," Irene wheezes, reaching out to gently pass her hand over their hair. "It's okay. You're going to be okay, Mathias. Can you—will you do me a favor?"

Mathias nods through their tears.

"Don't watch this part," Irene whispers. "I'm going to stay here with Regulus, yeah? Go into the cave until—until the cannon sounds. Go on."

"Irene," Mathias whispers, "I—"

"Go, Mathias," Irene orders firmly, shakily pushing at their shoulder.

"I'm *sorry,"* Mathias says, and they keep saying it, chanting it over and over as they weep and get to their feet, frantically stumbling towards the cave.

"Hey!" Irene calls after them, the word rattling in her chest and making her gasp as she reaches out to clamp down on Regulus' thigh. She smooths out her face when Mathias whips back around, even manages a smile. "I love you, kid."

Mathias' whole face crumbles, but they dutifully reply with a hoarse, "I love you, too," and then

they're gone.

Irene collapses back against the pole with a gasp, her fingers flexing into Regulus' leg. Regulus may not like her, but he doesn't pull away when her hand fumbles for his, holding on so hard that it actually hurts. The heli-carrier is close now, and Regulus follows Irene's gaze to see the coffin-like cage-claw slowly descending through the air.

"Think it'll wait for me?" Irene rasps.

"Probably," Regulus admits quietly. He doesn't know if she hears him over the rush of wind or not.

"So, um." Irene licks her lips and squeezes her eyes shut, face twisting with pain. "This—this is going to take a while, and I'd really like to get it over and done with." She reaches out with her other hand, fingers trembling as they slide over his hand where he's holding his last dagger. Her eyes flutter open so she can look at him. "Show a girl a little mercy, huh?"

It takes Regulus a second to get what she means. A lump forms in his throat immediately. "You want me to—"

"Finish me off? Yeah," Irene confirms. "Surprise, surprise, but this hurts really fucking bad, and I don't want to have to suffer through pulling it out to speed up the process. So, if you would be so kind…"

"Irene," Regulus says softly, eyebrows furrowed.

"The sooner you do it, the sooner you can get to James. He needs you." Irene swallows when he doesn't move, and she squeezes his hand around his dagger. "Please, Regulus. It hurts. Just—please."

"Okay," Regulus whispers, and he squeezes her other hand as he nods and takes a deep breath. He holds her gaze, because she deserves that, at least. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Irene whispers back. "You're helping me, and I have to admit, I did not see that coming. Don't—don't feel bad about this, yeah? I'm—I'm really grateful. Thank you."

Regulus swallows harshly, because he suddenly can't figure out why he didn't like her before, and all he feels for her now is a mixture of sorrow and respect. He lifts his dagger, and he doesn't look away as he does as she's asked him to. It's quick, though not entirely painless when she's already in pain to start with, he's sure, but he tries. Her eyes never leave his, and she holds his hand until her own falls slack and the cannon sounds. Regulus' eyes sink shut as he dips his head forward.

"Axus!"

At Mathias' shout, Regulus' head snaps up in just enough time to see them come sprinting past with a knife and a spear in one hand each, respectively. Cursing, Regulus launches to his feet and whirls around.

"Mathias! *Mathias,* no!" Regulus shouts, chasing after them.

Regulus' heart drops when he sees that Axus has taken notice of James, who is still holding onto Vanity and doesn't even seem aware that the heli-carrier is hovering above him, clearly waiting to scoop Vanity's body the moment James lets it go. It's obvious that Axus plans to take advantage of his grief, but Mathias is out for *blood,* due to their own.

The problem is, Axus is close to the bridge again, and Mathias is just barreling for them at full speed. This wouldn't *be* a problem if Axus wasn't aware of that or within hook-tossing range of the bridge. It happens fast; with just three easy lasso swings above their head, Axus tosses his hook to catch the edge of the bride while Mathias is making their way across, and then they give a harsh *yank.*

The end of the bridge on the bank in front of Regulus goes sailing forward, dipping into the water, making Mathias stumble backwards. Hands instantly come up out of the water, dragging the bridge under and taking Mathias with it, leaving Regulus deserted once again on the other side.

"Fuck. *Fuck!"* Regulus shouts, pacing back and forth as he shoves his hands through his hair. Axus reels their hook in and waves at him with a playful smile before turning to head right for James, swinging their hook. "No. No, no, no. James! *James!"*

Regulus screaming his name does manage to capture James' attention. He appears to suddenly become aware of what's happening, at least with the heli-carrier, which causes him to gently deposit Vanity on the ground and step away. It's clear that he's trying to watch her get lifted out, but sadly, he doesn't have the time to do that.

The cannon sounds for Mathias, drowning out Regulus shouting James' name in pure desperation. Axus is so close.

"James!" Regulus yells again, his heart sinking because—

As soon as James turns around, Axus throws their hook, and it embeds itself into James' thigh so deep that it goes clear across to the other side. Regulus' breath punches out of him as he surges forward as far as he can before he hits the river. With one harsh tug, Axus pulls James right off his feet.

James lands flat on his back, grunting and crying out in pain, but Axus doesn't even hesitate. They wind the rope around their arms, then drag a flailing, shouting James across the field and into the forest. Regulus can only stand there and watch, trapped on the other side of the river.

"Fuck, fuck, *fuck!"* Regulus snarls. He paces back and forth again, like an animal in a cage, his mind in an uproar.

James. They've got James.

It's all—everything just happened so fast, and practically everyone is fucking *dead,* and—and—

Regulus didn't even see everyone die. Mathias, Irene, and Willa, yes. But Vanity and Hodge? He has no fucking idea what happened to them. Five people dead, just like that, just that quickly. Irene's body is still behind him, his dagger still buried between her ribs and in her heart. As close to an instant death as he could get. Forty-five seconds at most.

Vanity has been lifted out, and the heli-carrier is indeed flying over to get Irene. He moves over quickly to get his dagger, his heart racing. He's gentle when pulling it out, and he takes the bolt, too, trying to wipe away some of the violence that happened to her here. She shouldn't be taken home with proof of how she died. He doesn't think she would want that.

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps one last time, then steps back to watch her get lifted out. Maybe it's stupid, but in his daze, he finds something mildly comforting about the fact that Vanity and Irene will be taken from here together.

It's not much of a comfort, but it's something.

Five people are dead. Six people remain. Bernice, Peter, Axus, Juniper, James, and Regulus himself. Regulus finds his bag and cleans his dagger as his mind races, eyes darting along the treeline, waiting for James to come back. He always—

Swallowing, Regulus takes a deep breath and slowly releases it. James is still alive. Wherever Axus is taking him, James is still alive. If he has his hatchet—wait, does he have—

Regulus scrambles forward to go right up to the river again, desperately searching the ground on the other side with his gaze. It takes him a second, and for a moment, he thinks that James *did* have his hatchet, which means he would have a weapon to fight with. But no, it's there on the ground, and the sight of it nearly takes Regulus out at the knees.

Okay, Regulus thinks, pacing again as he flexes his fingers around his last dagger. Okay. This is—it's okay, because James is still alive. There was no cannon, and it's been a few minutes now, so maybe James managed to get away. Maybe he snatched the hook out and somehow managed to hide, and that's the only reason he hasn't come back. Maybe Axus stopped to kill him—because of course they would—and James figured out a way to knock them out and get away.

There are a lot of scenarios that pass through Regulus' mind, and none of them matter, because no cannon has sounded, which means James is still alive. He just has to stay alive until this fucking river ices over, and then Regulus will find him.

Regulus is still very set on winning the games, but he can't deny that somewhere not as deep as it should be, he doesn't want James to die. It's not some big revelation, really. Regulus sort of already knew that, considering the lengths he's gone to help keep James alive. He knows—he *does* know that James is going to die. He has to die at some point. Just—just not now. Not yet. Not like this. Not when Regulus can stop it.

He doesn't know if that's his own stupidity, due to the heart flutters and the fact that he's known James practically his whole life, or if it's about Sirius in some way. Because he knows that Sirius will be absolutely fucking *wrecked* when James dies, and if all Regulus can do is put that off a bit more, just a bit longer, then he can't help but want to.

And—well, honestly, Regulus isn't ready to do this alone. He's not ready for James to leave him yet. He's not—he can't—

Boom!

At the sound of the cannon going off, Regulus goes very still. It's like the whole world stops for a second, and his ears start to ring as pressure builds and builds in his chest. He can't breathe suddenly. He's trying, but he can't, which causes him to put his hand to his chest to see if it actually caved in the way it just felt like it did. It's rising and falling at a rapid rate, but that doesn't make sense, because he's not getting enough oxygen. Briefly, he wonders if he somehow got wounded without knowing it, but no, no, he's fine. It's just superficial injuries from the fight with Bernice, so what's—what's *wrong?*

Something is wrong. He can't—he feels—

James, he thinks.

"No," Regulus says out loud. It's cold, hard denial. It doesn't *matter* if that's the only thing that makes sense, because Axus and James were the only two together, and James is injured, no weapon at all, and—and—

Regulus shakes his head, heaving out a harsh breath, choking on it. "Sirius," he rasps. "That—that wasn't him, right? Sirius, that wasn't James. It—it wasn't—Sirius? *Sirius,* was that—"

Of course, Sirius can't answer him. Sirius likely wouldn't be able to answer him even if he could, if it *was* James, because he would—he would be—

Helplessly, Regulus sinks down to the ground, trying so hard to fucking *breathe,* but he can't. He doesn't know how. *Panic attack,* his mind points out from a vague distance, which isn't really helpful information when he *can't stop panicking.*

James, Regulus thinks again. He buries his hands in his hair, rocking back and forth as struggles to breathe, muffling the broken sounds that fall out of his mouth against his bent knees. Again and again, he thinks *James, James, James.*

James.

James.

James.

~•~

"I *have* to find a way to tell him," Sirius hisses, starting to back up, but Marlene catches his arm.

"Sirius, there isn't a way you can tell him," Marlene whispers, her voice thick as she tugs him to a harsh halt. "Where are you going? What are you going to do?"

Sirius takes a deep breath, trying to keep his head about him. There are tears in Marlene's eyes, and her face is puffy. She'd been a wreck from the moment Vanity and Hodge died, and Sirius can't deny that it was fucking heartbreaking. Knowing the girl had a crush on the boy, and he killed her…

James didn't mean to push him in, Sirius knows that, but it's still hard to look Marlene directly in her eyes and see her grief right now. At the same time, James had held onto Vanity like he was losing a part of himself while losing her, and that makes it hard to look at Marlene, too. There's so much pain and loss between them, between everyone.

Frank and Emmeline are getting started on getting fucking drunk. Irene and Mathias' deaths were rough. At the time, Frank had admitted that he appreciated what Regulus did for Irene—a mercy killing, one necessary as it was, because Frank wouldn't have had the sponsors to help her anyway. Emmeline lost her last remaining tribute, too.

The cannon was for Juniper, not James.

It could have been James if not *for* Juniper. Axus had indeed been dragging James through the forest, only to fall in a hole, unbelievably enough. One Juniper had been digging in preparation for the approaching night. It had given James the time to get the hook out of his leg and run, but Axus killed Juniper, though not without her absolutely beating the fuck out of them first. Unfortunately, Axus had a weapon, so Juniper didn't make it.

James got away, though. He's hiding now, because his leg is quite bad, *but* Axus doesn't know where he went. They may be looking for him, but they're going in the wrong direction, and it won't be long before they'll need to settle down to get ready for the drop in temperature. James is alone in

a cave no one's been in before, in a lot of pain, but he's alive.

The problem is, Regulus is freaking the fuck out.

Genuinely, he's spiraling. Sirius doesn't think he's ever seen Regulus like this, not once in his life. It's *that* bad. Maybe it's not obvious to most, but Sirius knows his brother, and Regulus is failing to keep it together. Until he knows James is alive, he's going to continue to lose his collective shit.

Sirius has to tell him somehow. He has to calm Regulus down, because Regulus needs to go find James as soon as fucking possible. He's the key to healing James, because no sponsor wants to send medication until Regulus and James are reunited, wanting more romance between them, because that's more important to them than James' pain.

It makes Sirius want to rip the world apart, makes him want to shake these people, scream in their faces, just fucking *lose it* on them. These people are *enjoying* the fact that Regulus seems so upset about thinking James is dead. They're all sick fucks.

Sirius has been trying as hard as he can, but no one will do anything so soon, not until they see what Regulus is going to do. So, to help James and to calm Regulus down, Sirius needs to find some way to tell him what's going on.

He can't do that through a sponsor. They'll never allow it.

It's going to have to be in the arena.

"Sirius," Marlene says sharply when he pulls away.

"I need to go," Sirius declares. "I'm—I'm really sorry about Vanity and Hodge, Marlene. I truly am. Just—I have to go, alright? I have to try."

Marlene swallows. "Be careful. *Don't* do anything stupid."

Sirius doesn't reply, because if it takes something stupid to save his best friend's life and pick up the pieces of his brother, then he'll do it without hesitation.

Here's to hoping he doesn't have to.

Chapter End Notes

for those of you who do not want to read AT ALL, and just want a quick summary so you can skip the chapter entirely (which is valid), then ill do that first. SPOILERS AHEAD: ill water it down as much as i possibly can. so, basically, peter doesn't get to light the third fire before the death eaters catch up with him. they beat him up pretty badly, and they're about to kill him when bernice makes the comment that she wants james and regulus dead. peter tells her that he knows where they are and can take the death eaters to them, and so they go. a fight breaks out that ends with willa, hodge, vanity, irene, and mathias all dying—in that order. following that, regulus gets stuck on the other side of the river again, while axus throws their hook into james' leg and drags him off into the woods. a cannon sounds, and regulus has a panic attack because he thinks it's james, but it's juniper. seeing regulus so upset and knowing that to help james get medicine, then regulus will have to reunite with james, sirius sets out to find some way to let regulus know that james is alive.

for those of you who want/need more in-depth warnings to read:

-the depictions of violence: when the death eaters locate peter, they beat him very badly, and he gets shot in the leg with an arrow. he is described as begging for his life and crying, as well as apologizing repeatedly out of fear/desperation.

bernice and regulus get into a fight, and she nearly chokes him out, but peter saves him before she does.

axus and irene—and mathias—get into a fight as well. irene slashes at axus' leg with her sword, and axus buries their hook in irene's side, but she pulls it out and keeps fighting. mathias shoots their crossbow, but axus turns irene so that she takes the shot to the chest. regulus throws one of his daggers and hits axus in the arm with it.

-the depictions of injury: there's a description where james takes axus' hook to his thigh, and it's brief, but it is described as breaking through one side to the other.

-the depictions of murder/death (not the children/minors): mathias ends up in the river while attempting to run across the bridge, but axus uses their hook to yank it enough that the bridge gets dragged under, mathias along with it.

the depictions of children/minors dying: it's fairly brief, but willa is stung by vespa (the horcrux hornet) and falls into the river, taking vespa with her when she goes. following that, hodge uses his knife on vanity to cut her throat after bernice screams at him to kill her. james, while trying to reach her, shoves hodge aside, pushing harder than he means to in his panic, and hodge goes into the river as well. there's a brief scene describing the blood on vanity's throat and on her lips, but her death is fairly quick, just very fucking sad. juniper also dies—killed by axus, who fell in the hole she was digging—but it's not described and it's only mentioned, and it's said that she beat the shit out of axus before she died.

the depiction of a mercy-killing: after irene takes a crossbow bolt to the chest, she's carried over the bridge by mathias and regulus. she sends mathias away, and because she's in a lot of pain, she asks that regulus will kill her to make it quicker, so he does at her request. it's not described in too much detail, but it's explicitly stated that he stabs her in the heart, between her ribs, to make it as fast as possible.

for everyone else who has finished...

now you see why this one was so hard for me to write. like, i KNOW they're not real, and yet i still felt so bad. it's a lot all at once as well, which makes it even more difficult to digest.

i think it hits even harder when you realize that vanity and hodge are narrative foils to james and regulus, and also that hodge is a direct narrative parallel to regulus, if he had ended up in the arena when his name was called the first time. also, the fact that regulus stabbing irene was foreshadowed, and mathias used to miss most shots with their crossbow in the training room, but didn't miss this one...

also, regulus frantically begging sirius to tell him that the person who died wasn't james... and james being so upset about vanity, then getting injured again... im going to walk directly into traffic. goodbye, cruel world.

i say all of this as if i did not write it. just know that i, too, hate that ive written this. please don't be too harsh with me. im as devasted, i assure you.

let me do numbers, i guess :/

tributes remaining: 5
tributes who have died as of this chapter:
dylan
avery
quinn
evan
mulciber
willa
hodge
vanity
irene
mathias
juniper
eight unnamed/unknown others

if it helps at all, the next chapter, shockingly, has a lot less angst. like, barely even any, really

updating on saturday...

Hope

Chapter Notes

hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-referenced to past child death
-references to past injuries
-references to past torture (sort of??? it's vaguely hinted at, but just in case)
-references to being sexualized as a minor (because of the whole Hallow thinking of sirius as a sex symbol, and it's not expressed in detail, but it's explicitly stated)
-discussions of issues surrounding sex and desire

you may not believe me, considering the previous chapter, but this one is really not as bad as the one before it—though, considering the previous one, that's not really saying much. the bar is on the floor, i am aware, but i really do think this will be soothing in some parts, at least.

enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Horace Slughorn looks mildly surprised to find Sirius requesting to speak to him, but he dutifully steps out of the gamemaker room, shutting the door behind him. Sirius plasters on his brightest smile, like his best friend isn't injured and his little brother isn't losing his mind.

"Sirius, m'boy, how can I help you?" Slughorn asks. "I'll have to ask you to make it quick, whatever it is, because we're hard at work, you understand."

Hard at work destroying lives, Sirius thinks, but he only chuckles and says, "Oh, yes, I don't doubt it. A good turnout, isn't it? Six dead all so close together. We haven't seen such action like that in… years, honestly. Positive reviews so far?"

"Overwhelmingly positive," Slughorn confirms, giving Sirius further reason to lose all faith in humanity. "Again, I have to thank you. I did not expect James and Regulus to be such a focal point this year, if I'm honest, but they're all anyone can talk about. James' moment with Vanity was especially moving, and now your brother is a mess at the thought that James is dead. The reunion will be magical, surely."

"Oh, if only," Sirius says, adopting an apologetic frown, and Slughorn's eyebrows furrow. "It's just

—well, I'll admit that Regulus will likely be relieved when he finds James again, but I'm sorry to say that he'll still be quite withdrawn. I fear the viewers might end up being disappointed, after all."

Slughorn looks startled. "Surely this is enough to bring the boy's feelings to the surface. It warrants a kiss, at the very least. Perhaps a love confession?"

"Regulus won't see it that way," Sirius murmurs, feeling sick that he's standing here, talking about his little brother's love life, plotting how to use it to their advantage while pretending to let *Slughorn* use it to his advantage. "See, you asked before what it would take to, ah, break through to Regulus, what push he needs, and I'm here to tell you."

"Yes?" Slughorn prompts, watching him eagerly, focused.

Sirius reaches out and gently squeezes Slughorn's shoulder, lowering his voice like he's trading secrets. "Hope. Regulus needs hope."

"Hope," Slughorn replies, leaning back a little to blink at him.

"Mhm." Sirius nods his head and gently squeezes his shoulder again. "Regulus isn't the type of person who believes in the saying: *it's better to have loved and lost than never love at all.* In fact, he will go out of his way to avoid love if he knows he's going to end up losing, you see, but if he had *hope…"*

"Well, unfortunately he'll end up losing regardless, so I'm not sure what you mean," Slughorn says.

"The thing is, Regulus wouldn't keep holding himself back if he knew he had a future to look forward to with James. A future to *fight for,"* Sirius tells him, his heart racing as he works to keep himself outwardly calm. If this works… Fuck, if he manages to pull this off… The mere thought makes his hands shake, but he covers it well, and Slughorn doesn't notice. "He'd put up a fight like no other if he had that hope."

Slughorn is silent for a long moment, and Sirius can see the idea taking shape in his eyes; Sirius knows what it is, because he's leading Slughorn right to it. He just has to say it, like it's *his* idea, and Sirius will play him like a fiddle. *Come on, come on, you're almost there,* Sirius thinks.

"A future," Slughorn muses thoughtfully, and again, Sirius gently squeezes his shoulder—reinforcing good behavior and approval through body language. Sirius has this down to a science after years of being a mentor. "If I could give Regulus hope, you say? Hope for a future? One in which he could be with James, even…past the games?"

"That would do it, yes," Sirius assures him.

Slughorn hums. "That would facilitate all the proper romantic peaks everyone is looking for between them?"

"Without a doubt," Sirius confirms.

"So…the promise of *two* Victors," Slughorn says softly. "Two tributes from the same district could be Victors."

"Oh, *brilliant,"* Sirius breathes out, beaming at him and squeezing his shoulder again. "You're brilliant. The best head gamemaker the hunger games has ever seen, no doubt. It's never been done before, you know. You'd be the first. You'd go down in history for it, and the audience—oh, the viewers would go *ballistic.* You'd be their hero!"

"They would like that, wouldn't they?" Slughorn agrees with a chortle, looking pleased, and of course he likes the praise. Of course he likes the idea that it was *his* idea. That's the whole point, really, because Sirius knows exactly what he's doing.

Sirius leans in conspiratorially. "They'd raise statues in your honor, and not only would you be facilitating romance, but you'd also have drama. Peter and Bernice remain as well, so that will keep the viewers on the edge of their seat if they decide to team up. Your idea—it's literally perfect. My word, I hope it isn't a bother for me to say, but your mind is at a level of which I could only dream of one day reaching."

"Oh, that's…" Slughorn turns vaguely puce, waving his hand as if to lightly brush off Sirius' words, but it's clearly pleased him. He's an older man with no children, and in his age, it seems that he wants to be influential to those younger to him; revered by them; praised by them. "Sirius, dear boy, you flatter me. I'm sure you'll be wise by the time you reach my age."

"Never as wise as you," Sirius says with a rich laugh, once again squeezing Slughorn's shoulder. "My apologies for taking your time. I'll let you get back to work, shall I?"

Slughorn smiles. "For the best. I have a lot of work to do."

~•~

Dorcas doesn't think she's ever rushed like this before in her *life*. She also hasn't looked like this where anyone could see her since… Well, frankly she can't remember a time that she's ever let herself look like this in public. She's wearing a holey t-shirt, thin pajama pants with blue cats all over them, a pair of green slippers, no accessories or makeup, and a bonnet.

Dorcas hasn't so much as left her place without being fully dressed, her hair and makeup done, wearing jewelry, and in a nice pair of shoes in *years*.

None of that matters, though, not really.

Not now.

Not when Vanity and Hodge are dead. Dorcas watched it happen, stricken enough that she broke down crying, and as soon as she got her wits enough to calm down, she started running. She barely even stopped to get her shoes.

Dorcas' chest is heaving when she finally comes to a stop in front of the door she's been running to like a maniac, not even bothering to try to get a ride. Her place was close enough that waiting for a ride wasn't something she was willing to do. So, instead, she ran. She never once stopped.

And now, here she is, gasping for air and genuinely *exhausted* as she raises her hand and knocks on the door. She tries to catch her breath, but it doesn't really work. Her whole body is screaming in protest for her ridiculous antics, but—

But Marlene opens the door, and it's worth it.

"I—I came as fast—as fast as I could," Dorcas pants out, holding her side where it aches from running.

Instantly, Marlene's face crumbles, and she practically spills out of the doorway and right into Dorcas' arms. Dorcas reaches up to wrap her arms around her tight, cupping the back of her head as she muffles a gut-wrenching sob right into Dorcas' shoulder. She's clinging, digging her fingers into Dorcas' back like claws, shuddering against her like she's falling apart. Dorcas swallows harshly and keeps an arm around her as she navigates them into the suite.

Marlene lets herself be led inside, trusting Dorcas to move her around while she's still attached, not caring if she stumbles. Dorcas doesn't care either; she closes the door and locks it, then carefully leads Marlene over to the lounge chair, pulling Marlene down on it with her. Marlene practically collapses against her and cries into her throat, and all Dorcas can do is turn her face into Marlene's hair and silently cry with her.

"They were—they were *so young,"* Marlene chokes out.

"I know," Dorcas whispers. "I know, Marlene. I'm so sorry."

It's a long time before Marlene calms down enough to stop crying, and even then, her breath hiccups out of her and she keeps sniffling. She doesn't raise her head from Dorcas' chest, and she breathes soft and slow, her fingers limp where they're draped over Dorcas' arm. Dorcas cards her fingers gently though Marlene's hair, careful not to pull on it.

"They made it so far," Marlene rasps, eventually. "Was it stupid of me to hope one of them could make it home?"

"No," Dorcas murmurs. "No, that wasn't stupid. You believed in them. You cared about them. That's never stupid."

Marlene takes in a soft, hitched breath. "I tried so hard, Dorcas, and the whole time—even from the start—I *knew* they wouldn't make it. I just… I really wanted to be wrong."

"I'm sorry," Dorcas tells her, a lump in her throat, because she is. It's not her fault, but that doesn't stop her from wishing it never happened, wishing she could fix it. She's so fucking sorry that they're gone, that Marlene is in pain, because it's not fair. None of this is fair.

"Why would he do that?" Marlene whispers, lifting her head to look at Dorcas through puffy eyes. "Hodge just—he killed her. Why would he—how could he—"

"He was scared, I think." Dorcas takes a deep breath and pulls her hand forward to cup Marlene's cheek, swiping her thumb through teartracks. "I don't know. I—I really can't say, but he was being yelled at by Bernice; his other friend has just died, Willa; everyone was fighting, and James was running right for him. Up until that point, he never really hurt anyone. I think it just came down to fear."

"It's just fucked," Marlene says. "She had a crush on him, and she spent her last moments knowing that he killed her. And worrying about Vespa, who she just saw get taken into the river, except Vespa is basically immortal, so she's just perpetually suffering, I guess." Marlene shakes her head. "I know that's *exactly* what Vanity was probably thinking about while she was dying. Oh, and James. At least she had James."

"I, um. Well, I didn't get to see everything that happened after," Dorcas admits. "I pretty much immediately left, so I have no idea what happened to the others."

"Did you—did you run here?" Marlene croaks, staring at her with wide, watery eyes.

Dorcas nods. "About four miles, yeah."

Marlene stares at her for a long moment, then shifts up and grips the cushion by Dorcas' head to lean in and kiss her. It's not a deep kiss, not harsh or biting or heated. It's soft. So soft and so gentle, just a brush of mouths, warm and sweet. For someone who doesn't remember how to be gentle, Marlene takes to it startlingly well, treating Dorcas like she's precious.

"Thank you," Marlene whispers when she pulls away.

"Of course. I—I told you, I care about them, too," Dorcas says with a weak smile. "And I care about you, if that wasn't obvious. I don't leave the house like this for just *anyone,* McKinnon. I look —"

"Beautiful," Marlene cuts in, full-stop, like it's not even up for debate. "You're beautiful, Dorcas, always."

Dorcas knows beauty isn't the most important thing in this world—there are far more pressing matters than what one looks like, which not enough Hallows know—but that doesn't mean she doesn't appreciate the compliment. She wouldn't say she's vain, or insecure, but she's grown up in a setting where beauty is almost a currency. Marlene makes her feel rich, and she's never really been

poor in that regard anyway.

Marlene lays her head back on Dorcas' chest, and Dorcas strokes her hair in silence again. Neither of them speak for a long time, and Dorcas knows they're both thinking of Vanity and Hodge. They're not the only ones who cared about them, because they no doubt had family, and Dorcas watched enough of the games to see that James, Peter, Irene, Mathias, and even Regulus cared about Vanity. Hodge's closest friend was Willa, due to the similarities in their age, but even that was a bit of a stretch. Still, that's not enough. The whole world should have cared, but so few actually did.

So few actually do care about any of these people. It's like as soon as they enter the arena, the tributes are nothing more than characters in a show to them, except these are real people's *lives.* For some, the stakes are what draw them in. For others, they're willfully ignorant to the reality staring them right in the face. They don't *want* to see it, because looking at it means seeing their part in it.

One day, these people are going to find themselves caught in the midst of a war—one that's building—and they're not even going to understand why, or what's happening. Some people will see it for what it is, and there will even be some that are going to do the right thing.

Like Gideon and Fabian. They were never ignorant, and Dorcas knew instantly that they would be willing to fight. She didn't expect them to die for the cause before the war ever reached them. And now there's Molly, who is on a train right now to go see her brothers' bodies at the Phoenix, because the Order retrieved them after an informant told them where they were dumped. They'll have funerals, and Molly will get to attend, but Molly will never again get to come home. When she left, she left everything behind to fight in her brothers' name in a war that's barely even started yet.

One of Dorcas' biggest regrets is recruiting Fabian and Gideon Prewett in the Order of the Phoenix. She *knows* she's supposed to. That's literally her job, but they're dead, and she can't help but feel partially at fault. She has a lot of responsibilities in the Order from her place in the Hallow, and she knows the risks just like everyone, but it never sits right with her when she sees another person brought into this and has to come to terms with the fact that they might die.

"I want to burn the Hallow for this," Marlene rasps, and Dorcas feels her heart jump. "Sorry if that's offensive, but—"

"No," Dorcas says quickly. "That's—no, it's fine. I do, too."

"If I could, I would bring the Hallow to its knees," Marlene informs her, sounding downright *dangerous.* Dorcas swallows thickly, staring up at the ceiling as she continues to pass her fingers through Marlene's hair. "If there was some way to do it, I'd give anything to take Riddle down and end these games so what happened to Vanity and Hodge never happens again."

Dorcas holds her breath for a long moment. It's like she can feel Dumbledore's piercing gaze on the side of her head from here, which is ridiculous. He's like a shadow in the room, waiting in the corner, looming with his withered hands folded ever so gently together. She knows what he wants; she knows what she's supposed to do in this situation.

Exhaling slowly, Dorcas tips her head down to look at Marlene where she's still resting her head on her chest. Carefully, with a tenderness that makes her chest ache, Dorcas sweeps her hair back from her face, and she can't. Dorcas can't do it. She knows that she should, that it would make up for the loss of Gideon and Fabian, in Dumbledore's eyes, and it's not as if Marlene wouldn't be a brilliant asset.

But Dorcas can't do it. Whether Marlene would be willing to take the risks or not, *Dorcas* isn't willing to risk her. Not her. Not Marlene, who cares about children despite the fact that she knew she couldn't save them. Not Marlene, who has a rough grip and kindness in her heart. Not Marlene, who wants to fight, but deserves to rest. She deserves to be safe.

So, all Dorcas says is, "Yeah, Marlene, me too."

"A part of me is—" Marlene's voice catches, but she breathes, and it evens out again. "I know this is awful, but a part of me is *relieved.* Just relieved that it's over, and they're not suffering anymore. And neither am I. Maybe that's selfish—"

"I don't think so," Dorcas murmurs, sliding her hand down to cup Marlene's jaw and tilt her face up. "I think you're allowed to feel however you feel about it. This isn't… Well, you already know that this situation is fucked up as it is. We're hardly going to respond to it conventionally, are we?"

"No, I suppose not," Marlene replies quietly.

"I'm here, alright? I'm here," Dorcas tells her, then dips in and presses a short, warm kiss to her mouth, mostly in the need for comfort and the desire to give it.

As Dorcas pulls back, Marlene mumbles, "You're a really good—"

"Hook-up?" Dorcas fills in when Marlene seemingly gets stuck. Her mouth twitches up slightly when Marlene clears her throat and purses her lips.

"Well, you're a little bit more than a hook-up, at this point, I would say," Marlene tells her, gesturing to her current state pointedly, making it clear that just some random hook-up wouldn't get to see her like this—and Dorcas gets that, really. It's not exactly something you share with just anyone. Things like this can be even more intimate than sex. "No, I think you're a good…friend, Dorcas Meadowes."

"A good friend," Dorcas repeats softly, her lips curling up helplessly as Marlene avoids her gaze. The thing is, Dorcas can't really offer her anything else, as much as she would like to. Of course a part of her wants to say *fuck friends, let's be more,* but it's not that simple. She has responsibilities, and her permanence in this world—in this brewing war—is not guaranteed. Frankly, the more Marlene gets involved with her, the more danger she's in, and the more she has to lose. While Dumbledore would be willing to ask her to take such risks, Dorcas is not, so she says, "Well, I'm honored to be your good friend, Marlene McKinnon."

Marlene meets her gaze, and she looks slightly disappointed, but she has a lot of things to be disappointed right now, so Dorcas is sure she hardly qualifies. Marlene doesn't fight it, in any case. She just quirks a tiny smile and murmurs, "Yeah."

"Come here," Dorcas whispers, pulling her in again.

"Will you stay tonight?" Marlene whispers back, settling in against her once more.

"Of course," Dorcas answers, and she does.

What are friends for, right?

~•~

Remus watches with Pandora's hand holding his tight as Regulus goes through the first stage of grief—denial—then hits anger and gets stuck, or maybe he just goes mental.

Whatever it is, it's awful to watch.

Regulus moves like a man on a mission, stomping from the cave to the river over and over to drop each weapon and every bag of supplies—excluding his own—into the water to be taken under by pale, clawed, skeletal hands. He tosses away practically *everything;* every tool, every bit of food and water, and every single weapon not already gone or taken. He keeps his dagger and his bag of supplies, and that's it.

Remus is quite sure that Regulus' plan is to murder everyone. He's making it very clear that the only way to properly survive this will be to fight, and based on his visible pent-up agitation, he's just *itching* for a fight. From what Remus has gathered, Regulus is about to go from the hunted to the hunter.

It's getting late, the temperature clearly dropping, but the river still hasn't iced over yet. Remus wonders if that's on purpose, if the gamemakers are deliberately keeping Regulus in a cage. He's pacing like a wild animal, unable to be still, blatantly waiting for the chance to go. No one's ever stayed awake to chase people down before, simply because it's too cold, Remus thinks, but he's pretty sure Regulus is about to be the first. He's so vengeful that Remus genuinely believes he will find each and every remaining person to kill them.

Unbeknownst to him, however, James is very alive. He's sequestered away in a small cave, clearly in a lot of pain. Thankfully, he's wrapped his leg, but it obviously hurts him. What hurts him more, Remus thinks, is the loss of all his friends in one fell swoop. James is grieving, there's no denying that; he's just sitting there, weeping as he stares down at the vial of Horcrux Hornet venom Vanity died holding onto.

James is slumped inside his cave, and his escape has clearly taken a lot out of him, because he's starting to nod off, despite his grief. His eyes are visibly drooping, and it doesn't take long at all before he's passed out. Remus doesn't know if it's from the blood loss or the pain, but it's worrying anyway.

Remus is on edge for many different reasons. Regulus and James are in the final five, and they're both hurting. Bernice and Axus are still out there. They haven't found each other yet, both settling down on their own for the night, but Remus knows it's only a matter of time—if Regulus doesn't get to them first. Peter also remains, but his stance as an ally is undetermined, as far as Remus is concerned. Yes, he helped keep Bernice from killing Regulus, but he also sold out James and Regulus to Bernice in the first place; in a way, he's partly responsible for the deaths of so many of his allies, people that he spent time with and ended up caring for. It came from fear and the desperate need to survive, Remus knows that, but it still infuriates him, because all of that carnage could have been avoided if Peter didn't do what he did.

"Attention, all tributes," Slughorn's voice rings through the arena, loud and clear, and four of the tributes look up at the same time, because James is knocked out. Remus tenses as Pandora grips his hand tighter and holds her breath. "The current rule allowing only one Victor is now officially changed to allow two tributes from the same district to be Victors. That is all. May the odds be ever in your favor…"

As Slughorn's voice fades out, Remus feels a shock run down his spine as soon as it hits him what that means. He sucks in a sharp breath, his heart surging forward in his chest, because that means —that means James *and* Regulus can win.

Both of them.

On the screen, Regulus seems to be realizing this, too, and it apparently smacks him right out of his anger as he tilts his head up to the sky with a furrow in his eyebrows. His lips part, something shifting in his eyes, and then he slowly swivels his head as if in deep thought. It takes him a second, another, then one more, and *then* his eyes absolutely light the fuck up.

"James," Regulus breathes out, then starts running.

"No, no, no," Remus blurts out, jolting forward as panic seizes him. "Not the—oh, Regulus, the *river—"*

It's close. Too close. Regulus seems to remember at the very last moment that he can't simply walk on water, and he skids along the ground with a curse, trying to skitter back as his momentum sends him forward. His boot grazes the water, and he yelps as he frantically shoves himself away, a pale hand darting up out of the surface to reach for him. Regulus kicks it *hard* and drags himself back, panting as he makes it a safe distance away. Remus finally exhales.

As for James, he remains passed out. He has clearly missed the announcement entirely. Remus doesn't doubt that Regulus will tell him as soon as he finds him, though.

"They can come home. Remus, they *both* can make it home," Pandora rasps, turning in her seat to stare at him with wide eyes full of tears, a beaming smile on her face.

"I *know,"* Remus agrees, breathless, and then they're both laughing and snatching each other into celebratory hugs, squeezing one another tight and swaying in place.

Perhaps ridiculously, Remus feels his heart swell, because as sad as it is that so many people are dead, there's still hope to be found. The people he cares about, *truly* cares about for the first time in five years—they're alive, and they can come home.

And *Sirius.* Oh, he must be—fuck, Remus can just imagine. Hope is an invigorating thing, and it doesn't *matter* if James and Regulus still have three people to beat, because the odds… For once, the odds are actually in their favor. They're so close, and Sirius is surely going to be fucking ecstatic.

If Regulus was desperate to get across the river before, that's *nothing* compared to him now. He seems less murderous, at least, but more frustrated than ever. The gamemakers keep him there, though, the light slowly fading and temperature clearly dropping, if the visible puffs of air leaving Regulus' mouth are anything to go by. Still, the river doesn't ice over.

First, there's the banners that play in the sky to signal all those that died, which takes place again tonight. Just like every other night, it goes in order.

To start with, there's Willa. Bernice and Axus watch from their positions, and Remus sees the grim expressions on their faces. In a way, Willa was the death eaters' Vanity; it was never Hodge, because he annoyed them all with his lack of abilities or willingness to kill. Maybe that's why he killed Vanity, finally cracking under the pressure, just trying to make *someone* proud. He was so young. Willa was, too.

Next is Hodge, which doesn't get the response it likely would if James were still awake. Regulus averts his eyes, and Peter visibly grimaces, but no one else seems to care. Bernice even scoffs and rolls her eyes. It's fucking depressing.

Following Hodge is Vanity. Regulus' eyes sink shut, and he ducks his head. Peter weeps. Remus grimaces, his own heart clenching, because that one was rough—and of course James (even though he's asleep) and Peter are hurt; they were the ones with Vanity from the very first day, and Peter had even more time with her than James did. To know that they both tried so hard to protect her, and they couldn't… Yeah, Remus would weep, too.

Irene is next, and that one visibly hits Regulus hard. It seems Regulus blames himself in some way. Maybe because it was his dagger that put her out of her misery. Eased her pain. It was a mercy killing, one she'd requested, but that doesn't keep Regulus from feeling responsible for it, clearly, even though she was going to die anyway.

Mathias next, and again, that one gets to them, too. Peter's friend. James' friend. Remus doesn't

know if Regulus saw them as a friend or not, but he obviously feels sorrow about the whole thing. Mathias died in a blind rage, desperate to avenge Irene's death, and there was some sort of cruel irony to the fact that they died on the bridge *they* built.

And, finally, there's Juniper.

This one gets mixed reactions. Bernice doesn't seem to care. Peter frowns and looks confused, his face scrunching like he doesn't even remember who she was. Axus scowls and lifts their hand to touch all their bruises that Juniper gave them, because she absolutely beat the fuck out of them before they killed her, like a feral little girl, frankly.

Regulus, though? He makes a choked noise, and then he releases a wheezing laugh and presses his face to his knees, sucking in deep breaths. It's relief. Undeniable relief. There's nothing else it could be, because that's so obviously what it is, and Remus knows exactly why. He's not relieved that Juniper is dead; he's relieved that James *isn't.*

There's confirmation. The announcement seemed to convince Regulus, but the proof brings him obvious solace.

Still, a bit later, Regulus remains trapped, and Pandora groans before saying, "Oh, they're just torturing him at this point. Let him *go,* for goodness sake."

"I *think* the river ices over at the same time every night," Remus admits with a sigh. "Not too long now."

"Look at him," Pandora whispers, watching Regulus once again pacing restlessly on the screen. "I don't think it matters how he actually feels about James. He wants so badly to get them both home. And James is…"

"Stuck," Remus murmurs with a wince, because James is, in fact, quite stuck.

Again, Remus feels concern shoot through him. Sirius still isn't back, and there's been nothing sent to James. If that wound is as bad as it looks, it's at a higher risk of infection; if sepsis sets in, he'll die. It could take as little as three days, and that's if no one comes to kill him first. Sirius knows this, so there's no doubt in Remus' mind that he's working hard to—

"Remus! Remus, it's starting to ice over," Pandora declares in visible excitement, bouncing in place. She reaches out to grab his thigh. "Almost… *Almost…* Alm—"

Regulus shoots off like a rocket before the river is even fully iced over all the way, following along the ice as it crawls across in front of him. Every step makes the ice fracture under his feet, but he doesn't seem to care. He doesn't even wait for the last little bit to ice over; he just launches himself forward and hits the ground running. On his way to the forest, he snatches up James' hatchet, and even that doesn't slow him down.

"Yes!" Pandora crows, tossing her hands up in delight.

At that exact moment, the door to the suite bangs open.

It's Sirius. He comes bursting in, eyes bright as the door shuts and locks behind him. His chest is heaving as if he's been running, and he looks flushed, something absolutely wondrous about his expression right now. Remus doesn't realize he's standing up until he finds himself moving along the edge of furniture to see Sirius better.

He's shaking from head-to-toe, rattling like he's about to fly apart with all the energy set loose within him. He's quite literally *vibrating,* and he looks like he wants to bounce around the room, bounce off the walls, run laps and shriek with joy at the top of his lungs. It reminds Remus vaguely of dogs getting the zoomies, finally unclipped from their leashes and desperate to just fucking *run.*

This turns out to be quite similar to what Sirius does, actually. Before Remus can even open his mouth to speak, Sirius sprints right for him, rushing across the room to launch himself directly into Remus' arms. Remus catches him with a grunt, stumbling back a step or two, but he mostly remains steady. Sirius has thrown his arms around Remus' shoulders while Remus catches him around his waist, and he can feel Sirius' frantic heartbeat against his own. Sirius is breathing hard, as if he's been running already.

"I take it you heard the announcement?" Remus whispers, laughing softly when Sirius squeezes him.

Sirius' hands fly up to frame Remus' face, and his voice is legitimately shaking when he croaks, "I —I did it. Remus, it was me. I convinced Slughorn to do that. I'm—"

"Brilliant," Remus says, breathless. "You're fucking *brilliant."*

"I saved them. I'm going to save them. Both of them," Sirius chants, and he's shining like a fucking star right now.

"You did. You—" Remus is cut off by Sirius kissing him, a harsh yet happy press of their mouths. It breaks quickly, and Remus thinks his heart might burst. "Yeah, you are. You're going to get them back. Both of them."

"They're going to come home," Sirius chokes out, and he's suddenly crying, even while he laughs. He's trembling still, but Remus holds onto him. "Both of them."

Sirius is clearly delirious with relief and excitement, which apparently leads him to press short—but fierce—kisses to Remus' mouth over and over in between choked laughter and a stream of tears. Remus lets him, meeting him halfway each time, feeling the moment swell around them until he almost can't breathe from it; the relief, the hope, the pure *respite* from all that's been wrong this entire time. It's like a break between dark clouds, the storm finally easing up.

Remus isn't surprised that Sirius ends up overwhelmed by it. The kisses taper off until Sirius is just hugging him, burying his face into the bend of his throat, and that's where he stays for long enough that Remus thinks he's probably not going to let go first. That's fine. He can do whatever he wants.

Carefully, Remus turns his head to glance over at Pandora. She's giving them privacy, watching Regulus on the screen instead, who has started his search.

"Sirius," Remus says gently, and Sirius raises his head slowly, seemingly calmer now. "Regulus is looking for James. Is—I mean, was no one willing to sponsor him?"

At this, some of Sirius' palpable joy wanes, but only a bit. He shakes his head. "No, people were *definitely* willing to sponsor James, but they want… Well, they want Reggie and James to earn it, basically. They want a show, of course."

"Don't they always?" Pandora asks bitterly. "Animals, the lot of them. They don't care about *James;* they only care about how he can entertain them. Oh, I could just—"

"Yeah, me too," Sirius says with a soft smile as he watches her mime strangling someone with her hands. He leans his head over on Remus' shoulder, not bothering to pull away from him as he talks to her. "It's okay, though, because Regulus *will* find James, and then I'll make sure James gets

healed, and then it's just three. Only three, and then they're home. Pandora—"

"I know," Pandora breathes out, turning to reach over the back of her seat, holding her hand out to him. Sirius breaks away from Remus for this, grabbing onto hers, and he looks mildly startled when she dips her head over his hand and kisses it. He blinks, then seems to realize she's essentially telling him that she admires him, and he—blushes.

"Oh, don't do that," Sirius mumbles, flustered. "Stop that, Pandora, I'm your *friend."*

Pandora looks up with a smile. "Yes, you are, and you're one of the smartest men I've ever known. That *deserves* admiration. You're going to bring them home, Sirius."

"Well, they're going to bring themselves home," Sirius says sheepishly, "but I did make that possible, yes."

"Incredible," Pandora murmurs, then smacks a more playful kiss to the back of Sirius' hand, chuckling when he ruffles her hair as soon as she pulls away.

"There's still Peter, Bernice, and Axus to worry about, but I think—" Sirius takes a deep breath and focuses on the screen, crossing his arms. "I really do think James and Regulus stand a good chance, especially once James is healed up."

"All Regulus needs to do is find James," Pandora says.

Sirius heaves a sigh. "Which he won't be able to do tonight. He went in the wrong direction, unfortunately. The good news is that there's a trail, so he will find James, just not when it's cold and dark. He'll eventually settle in for sleep before he passes out, then start again tomorrow. James should be fine where he is until Regulus reaches him, so long as no one else does first."

"You don't sound too worried," Remus comments, admittedly surprised by this, because Sirius would usually be *a lot* more stressed right now.

"I'm not." Sirius cringes a little. "Slughorn and practically all the viewers are desperate for Regulus and James to reunite and show them romance, so I don't doubt that Slughorn is going to do everything to make that happen. People would be very disappointed otherwise, and he won't let *that* happen. Is it awful? Yes, but it's to our advantage, so I'll take it."

"We can work with that," Pandora agrees. She taps the seat beside her. "Come on. Come watch."

Sirius reaches back to grab Remus' hand, tugging him along, and that's what they all do. Just like every other night, they all watch, but there's something different this time.

They watch with hope.

~•~

As predicted, Regulus eventually does settle in for the night. Sirius knows he's exhausted, barely having slept at all the night before, suffering from being emotionally *and* physically drained after the day he's had. James remains passed out in his cave, cold and alone.

Still, despite the less-than-best (not even acceptable, really) circumstances in which they'll spend their night, Sirius doesn't feel that bad. Actually, he doesn't feel bad *at all.* He feels fucking fantastic, because Regulus will be back with James very soon, and as long as Regulus can figure out what it will take to heal James, everything will be fine. Regulus is smart; he'll work it out, surely. And then all that's left to do is make it through three people. Only three, and then they're lifted out of there and on their way home.

Sirius is feeling really, *really* fucking good about it. He's aware, of course, that it's not a good idea to celebrate too soon. Things could still go wrong. He also knows it's a bit fucked up for him to be so excited when all of his mentor friends just lost their tributes. On top of that, there's still all the problems that will arise when James and Regulus *do* make it home; every single thing they'll have to deal with, all the grief and pain and fear and trauma, as well as how they'll cope with it.

Yes, Sirius isn't ignorant to all of that, but for one second, just *one day,* he wants to be fucking happy about something. He wants to drown himself in his hope and let himself feel every inch of what could be. He'd clung to this so hard before, that James and Regulus would both survive somehow, because he couldn't fathom anything else, and he fucking *made it happen.* He's going to get them back. He's going to be able to wrap his arms around them both and know he did it; he did everything he could to save them both, and it fucking *worked.*

So, Sirius is in a good mood, despite all the negatives, and he refuses to feel guilty about it. Whatever may come, all the ways it could go wrong—Sirius doesn't want to exist there yet. He wants to exist here, where, for now, he has something to look forward to, something to actually hope for.

"I'm going to suffer through Rita to see what the response to the rule change is," Pandora informs them when the cameras fade out and the woman in question shows up on the screen.

Sirius nods gratefully, knowing she'll tell him anything he needs to know in the morning. He stands up and tugs on Remus' hand to encourage him to do the same, even as he looks at Pandora and says, "I'm going to change and head for bed, I think. It's been a long fucking day."

"Yeah, alright," Pandora murmurs. "If I'm in bed before you make your way out, Remus, goodnight."

"Same to you," Remus replies, letting Sirius tug him along.

It has indeed been a very long day, making this morning when he told Remus about his memory issues and kissed him for the second time seem like a lifetime ago. So much happens in such a short amount of time, and Sirius just wants it all to stop. He wants to push everything to the side and just…forget it all, for a bit. As a mentor, especially working so hard to keep James and Regulus alive, he doesn't really have that option, but with this rule change, it's as close as he's going to get.

"Sirius?"

Blinking, Sirius looks back as he pushes his door open and lets Remus sweep in before shutting it. "What?"

"Any particular reason you've brought me with you?" Remus asks, looking faintly amused. "You said you were going to bed, and as much as I'd like to join you…I will have to leave soon."

"Oh. Right." Again, Sirius blinks rapidly, reaching up to scratch the side of his head. Frankly, he doesn't know why he dragged Remus along; he just wasn't ready to let him go yet. Though, really, he never is. "Sorry, I suppose I just got a bit caught up in holding your hand. You didn't—obviously you didn't have to follow. Um, when do you need to go?"

Remus glances past him to look at the clock. "Mm, I don't have to go for another two hours. I can stay until then."

"Do you want to?" Sirius checks. "In here, I mean. With me."

"No, it's torture," Remus teases, and he shakes his head when Sirius huffs out a weak laugh and looks away. "Yes, Sirius, I'd like to stay with you until I have to go."

"Brilliant," Sirius declares, feeling a jolt of delight slam through him, and with all the good news, he can finally appreciate the feeling in its entirety. "No, yeah, brilliant. I have just the *most* energy right now, so do you mind—I mean, is it alright if I just talk your ear off as I change? Because, honestly, I feel like I'm going to explode. You don't have to listen; you can just tune me out and nod along, and that will be enough to keep me entertained."

"I'm happy to listen," Remus tells him, amused.

Sirius snorts and moves over to grab Remus by his shoulders, walking him over to the bed and gently pressing down so he'll sit on it, facing the closet. "If you last five minutes without tuning me out, I'll be shocked. No one can do that once I get going, except for maybe James, but he's usually going right along with me, so that's different."

"I like hearing you talk," Remus murmurs, tilting his head to look up at him, his long throat on display.

"Well, you're in luck," Sirius replies with a smile, then swivels on the spot to throw open the closet and step inside.

The next twenty minutes pass with Sirius chattering away at a rapid pace in between looking for something to sleep in; he wants something nice, something really nice that makes him feel good, sort of like a reward for actually accomplishing what he has today. Randomly, he pokes his head around the closet door to see if Remus is paying attention, and he always is.

Every time Sirius peeks out of the closet, Remus is sitting patiently in place, a mild smile curling his lips. His gaze is always warm with affection and fondness, and Sirius feels his heart beat faster with each stolen glance. He keeps retreating quickly, his face hot and his body…also hot.

Sirius does indeed spend plenty of time talking about the fact that Regulus *and* James both could be home, and how the first thing he's going to do as soon as he has the chance is hug them and maybe, possibly never let them go again. He also goes on a long tangent about clothes when he gets distracted by them, because he has *options* in the Hallow.

"I don't often feel good enough to actually wear a dress in the Hallow, but you should know, Remus, that I look fucking *marvelous* in a dress," Sirius feels the need to point out.

There's a beat, and then Remus says, "I won't believe that until I see the proof with my own eyes."

"You just want to see me in a dress."

"Yes, absolutely I do."

Sirius grins and pokes his head around the closet door to raise his eyebrows at Remus. "You should see me when I get my hair and makeup done. Oh, and put me in some heels? It's been ages, but I break necks when I walk by."

"I don't doubt it," Remus tells him, clearing his throat. Sirius leans further out until he's resting one arm against the wall, his torso on display in the closet doorway. To his credit, Remus is fighting valiantly to be a gentleman about this, not dropping Sirius' gaze to ogle him with his shirt off. Sirius can tell he's tempted, though; it's not off-putting when it's him.

"Do you really want to see me in a dress?" Sirius asks.

Remus blinks. "Sure, if you'd like."

"Come pick one, then," Sirius says lightly, then slips back into the closet, tucking his lips in to hide a grin.

"In the closet?" Remus calls.

"Where else?"

"Just—I mean, are you naked in there?"

Sirius stifles a laugh. "Only one way to find out, but the question is *do you dare,* Remus Lupin?"

Again, more silence. Sirius turns and waits, because he already knows what Remus will do. It might take him a second, but he's a rebellious bastard, always enticed by trouble and mischief, so much more daring than he lets on, so of course he will be in here with Sirius momentarily.

Sure enough, only a few moments later, Remus ducks inside the closet, which isn't *too* small, but not big enough for two grown men to have more than a two steps between them.

"Oh, hello, hi," Sirius teases.

"Hi," Remus replies, then tilts his head. "You're not naked."

"Yes, I'm still in my pants. Disappointing, isn't it?" Sirius says with a mock-sigh.

"Absolutely crushing," Remus murmurs, but he's distracted reaching out to trail the very tips of his fingers over the scar down by Sirius' left hip, on his stomach.

"Nearly killed me," Sirius comments, glancing down at it. Ten years later, and it's faded only a bit. "It would have if it wasn't the last wound I got before I won. They pulled me out and patched me up before I bled out, but not all wounds can be healed without scar tissue remaining behind."

"Yeah, I know," Remus says softly. He traces it again gently, and Sirius feels a shiver go up his spine at his touch. "You have more, don't you? You said that before."

"I have one on the back of my calf from where I was shot with an arrow," Sirius tells him, then turns around. "This one across my back where I was slashed with a sword."

Remus hums and reaches up to trace that one, too. It spans from Sirius' left shoulder all the way down to the small of his back. "It aches when it gets cold, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, it does," Sirius murmurs, eyebrows furrowed. Remus speaks like he knows, like he *understands,* but he did say he had scars as well, didn't he? "I also have a burn scar on my right knee. That one is rough. It's not too big, but it healed inside the arena, so there was nothing they

could do about it."

"It should've never happened," Remus whispers.

Sirius turns back around slowly. "Too late for that now. But, you know, on the bright side, scars are sexy."

"I—" Remus blinks, then chuckles, his eyes softening as he breaks out into a grin. "Is that so?"

"Well, you can't deny that I'm only more attractive for it, can you?" Sirius asks, waggling his eyebrows and actively fishing for compliments at this point. He wants them. He wants Remus to look at him and like what he sees.

"No, I can't," Remus agrees, and Sirius resists the urge to do a little wriggle of triumph. "Really, your body is a galaxy, and your scars are your stars."

Sirius is once again caught off-guard, and it flusters him in seconds. He knows he's blushing, not only because he can feel the heat in his face, but also because Remus gets that fond, pleased look in his eyes. Sirius feels winded, like Remus just stole his breath, and so his voice is a soft rasp when he whispers, "Fancy a trip to space?"

"There is nothing I would like more," Remus says.

That's all Sirius really needs to close the distance between them, and then Remus is swooping in to kiss him before he can make it there first. Sirius is immediately swept up into it, pressing as close as he can get and winding his hands into Remus' hair. He shudders as Remus' hands land on his bare skin, roaming along his sides and his back.

They're both breathing a little shakily, heavy and panting as their mouths break apart and come right back together over and over. Remus' hand on Sirius' lower back slides up, and the other drops down to grip his hip, holding on firmly as he starts walking Sirius back.

Sirius goes wherever Remus wants him to, willing to do anything or go anywhere, whatever Remus wants. This ends up with him bumping into the closet door, making it clatter since it's in the way, but Remus mindlessly yanks it aside without ever breaking the kiss. He shoves it away so hard that it rattles as it flings open, and Sirius' breath hitches at the sound. It fills the space around them with

a sense of urgency, and Remus is so single-mindedly focused on him right now that Sirius feels like his knees are about to buckle.

Remus pushes him back, keeping him from tripping, and Sirius doesn't even care about his balance at the moment. All he cares about is the world-altering heat of Remus' mouth, and the way one of Remus' hands sink into his hair.

Remus does something downright *sinful* with his tongue that drags a low groan out of Sirius' throat. He's never heard himself make that noise before, not for anything, and he's not sure how he feels about it, because it sounded needy and desperate. Whether *he* likes it or not, Remus sure seems to. His fingers tighten in Sirius' hair—not enough to hurt, but enough to encourage Sirius to tip his head back, which he does—and he pulls away from the kiss to bring his mouth to Sirius' throat instead. Sirius doesn't even mean to, but he arches into it, his hand tightening in Remus' hair, which is soft between his fingers and winding around his knuckles.

The attention that Remus gives his neck makes Sirius' head all foggy, like he's in a fugue state, his consciousness dancing somewhere out of reach. He feels weak all over, and terribly shaky, but in a good way? A really, *really* good way. He actually feels like he's about to just—fall over, like he'll tip back on the floor and take a moment that he may or may not need. He doesn't want it, not in the least, but he's so overwhelmed that he kind of feels like he should lay down.

Remus does not seem to pick up on this, but Sirius can't really blame him; he's really focused on what he's doing, and Sirius sure as hell isn't about to be the one to stop him. There's the catch of teeth against his throat, an exploratory nip more than anything, and Sirius hears himself make that sound again. High and thin in his throat, he moans a bit too loud, probably, but again—he can't help it. At least Remus seems to like it, which he makes obvious by pressing closer to Sirius.

"Remus, your—the—can I—I want—" Sirius can't form complete sentences at the moment, but Remus seems to pick up on what he's asking for anyway.

Without hesitation, Remus pulls back and snatches his shirt off, tossing it off over his head carelessly. It's the same one he always wears, the one all servants wear—a boxy, grey shirt with long-sleeves. Very unassuming. Nothing noticeable or eye-catching about it. Also a damn crime, because what it's been hiding *underneath…*

And look, Sirius has had the privilege of running his hands all over Remus' chest and shoulders, so he *knows* just how firm Remus is, but *seeing it* is something else entirely. Sirius can only make a hoarse noise and reach out to touch, genuinely feeling a bit weak in the knees. Remus is fucking *fit.*

"When I get bored in my cell, I exercise," Remus explains.

"I can see that," Sirius croaks, sounding like he might start crying at any moment. He *feels* like he is. Have you ever seen someone so beautiful that you want to cry? Well, Sirius officially has. "Remus, you're—fucking hell, you're—"

"Oh, I'm not this flawless all over," Remus mutters. "Have a look at my scars. It's only fair, I suppose."

Sirius blinks as Remus turns around, and then he sucks in a sharp breath, because fucking shit. Oh. Well, Remus has far more scars that Sirius does, that's for sure. The violence behind them is undeniable, and Sirius' stomach drops out from beneath him just imagining how Remus got them.

Remus' back is absolutely covered in thin, overlayed scars from what Sirius can only imagine was a whip. They span from the backs of his shoulders all the way down to the very bottom of his back. A few overlap to his sides, but not very much. It's all central to here, and Sirius knows what this is. It can only be one thing. Remus has been whipped *a lot.* This isn't just scars from one time; some of them are older than the others, more faded, while some criss-cross across his skin.

"The Hallows did this to you?" Sirius breathes out.

"Actually, no," Remus says quietly. "I got these long before I ever came to the Hallow. They still whipped people as a punishment in my district."

"Shit, Remus," Sirius mumbles, his tone heavy. He shakes his head and leans forward to press a kiss over one of the scars. Remus releases a soft sigh, so Sirius does it again and again, as much as he can reach while standing up behind him. When he pulls away, he says, "Well, you have more stars than me."

"I wouldn't say these are stars," Remus murmurs as he turns back around. "The way they're torn into my skin. It's—I don't know, sort of like craters."

"If we're sticking to a space theme here, then I'd remind you that the moon has craters. That makes you the moon. My moon," Sirius says lightly, leaning in to kiss his jaw.

Remus huffs a weak laugh. "Your moon? Is that right?"

"Well, you know, Sirius is one of the brightest stars in the sky. I'll be your star if you'll be my moon," Sirius muses, speaking softly in between mouthing at Remus' jaw, heading for the side of his throat. "We're already something, so we may as well give it a name. Can't steal the moon, can't keep the stars, but we're fortunate enough to know them anyway. Isn't that us?"

"Yeah," Remus whispers. "Yeah, that's us."

In the next second, Remus is tilting Sirius' face up to kiss him *hard,* and Sirius muffles a moan into his mouth. Yet again, Remus begins walking him backwards, and this time he doesn't stop. He keeps right on going until they're falling, until they hit the bed.

They land with a little bounce, and Sirius' head spins as Remus turns them, scooting down a bit to break the kiss and go for his throat. Sirius can't stop himself from making that needy noise yet again, because Remus is no doubt leaving marks, just like this morning. And people noticed. People looked. People assumed, and Sirius could only find secret pleasure in the fact that it was *Remus* who had left them there. He's doing that again, all while turning them so they're on their sides, drawing their bodies closer together, all heat and desperation.

In doing so, in getting closer, Remus' leg slots between Sirius', which is—okay, that sure is something. For one thing, it's mildly concerning, because Sirius is *not* dressed appropriately for this occasion. His pants are loose and soft and have enough room to make it embarrassingly easy to rock his hips so he gets *a lot* from that simple motion. Sirius' mouth falls slack, his chest heaving as Remus just—carries on.

"Okay, okay, that's—Remus," Sirius chokes out, his free hand falling to the bed, fingers twisting in the sheets. Again, his hips rock of their own accord, his body *very* clear on what it wants, even if his mind is in an uproar at the moment. Another high noise leaves his mouth, a soft whimper. This feels good. Very good. *Too* good. "Remus, I—I, um, can't—I'm not going to—this is really—"

Remus presses kisses up his throat, making a quiet noise like he's listening, but Sirius isn't entirely sure he is. Not in a malicious way, just more like he's very, *very* distracted at the moment. That becomes increasingly obvious when he finds a new spot on Sirius' throat to latch onto, a searing pressure of heat as he *sucks,* and Sirius' hips jerk again, sending yet another spike of pleasure through his every nerve-ending. Sirius doesn't mean to, but he releases a low curse and bangs his hand down on the bed. That makes Remus jolt, his mouth detaching as he pulls back and looks at him.

"Are you alright?" Remus asks, blinking rapidly like he's coming out of a daze.

"Yes. No. I mean—" Sirius tries to take a steadying breath, but it's hard when his hips are still just doing whatever they like. He attempts to stop them, but they've really got it all figured out by now, knowing what feels good and how precisely to get to it. Another roll of his hips, and Sirius whimpers again, his hand coming down from Remus' hair to brace against his shoulder, clinging for dear life.

"Sirius?" Remus murmurs, his hand carding through Sirius' hair like he's trying to soothe him, as if he's finally picking up on the fact that Sirius is struggling right now. Sirius is so glad that he's done that, and also struggling all that much more for it, because Remus' hand in his hair feels good, too.

"I'm—this feels really good," Sirius blurts out like an idiot, as if that's not been made painfully obvious by now. His other hand drops from Remus' hair, back to the bed, and he holds on tight as he yanks a little frantically at the sheets.

Remus hums. "Well, yes, it's meant to. That's—that's a good thing, isn't it?"

"Remus, *Remus,"* Sirius says, the name punching out of his mouth, and he's just legitimately squirming against Remus at this point. He can hear how distressed he sounds, mingled with the contradicting approval, because it's good, but—

"Sirius," Remus declares firmly, one hand falling down to clamp on Sirius' hip, stopping him. Sirius gasps for air like he's desperate for it, flexing his fingers into Remus' shoulder and curling his nails against the bed. Somehow, stopping is almost worse than doing it, but also a relief at the same time.

Sirius tries to calm down, but it's not really working, if he's honest. He stares at Remus like he's a god, and also possibly a terrifying eldritch horror come to ruin his life. His face burns as he admits, "I have a problem. I think—I mean, I'm fairly sure I was about to get off with you."

Remus hesitates, then calmly asks, "Why is that a problem?"

"Because I—" Sirius struggles, trying to put it into words, still pent up and desperate to just continue. He's a mess of contradictions at the moment, at war with himself, and he sort of hates it. "I've never wanted to, alright? I've never—I didn't know it would feel—I mean—"

"Sirius," Remus says gently, *"breathe."*

"I'm *trying,"* Sirius hisses, and Remus looks shockingly fond, his face softening. "It's a problem, because it's like I'm what they think I am. Being made into a sex symbol doesn't matter as much when I'm not getting off, and *liking it.* Look at me. I'm fucking gagging for it, and it's—it's—"

"Alright, hey, just…" Remus lifts one hand and does something that Sirius isn't expecting to be so comforting. He brushes his palm over Sirius' forehead, pushing his hair back. "It's okay. I think I understand now. Your relationship to desire is complicated, and that's not your fault. You're—are you ashamed? Is that it?"

Sirius swallows harshly. "Yes."

"You don't need to be," Remus tells him quietly. "Sirius, really, there's nothing wrong with feeling good. You're *allowed* to feel good and do what you want. And if you *don't* want to, then there's nothing wrong with that either. There's nothing to be ashamed of. Your desire is your own, not anyone else's."

"I was really loud," Sirius mumbles, which is probably stupid, but he's genuinely embarrassed about it.

Remus opens his mouth, then closes it, then clears his throat and nods. "Yes, you were." Sirius groans, squeezing his eyes shut, but Remus waits for Sirius to look at him, then smiles. "There's nothing wrong with that. I—well, if it helps, I liked that you were. You don't need to be quiet, Sirius."

"It's like I'm proving them right," Sirius whispers, twisting his fingers in the sheets. "I don't want to prove them right, Remus, but it—it felt so good."

"This isn't about them," Remus says softly. "Sirius, this has nothing to do with anyone but me and you. It's between us, *just* us, and you can like it. In fact, I'm really grateful that you like it, because it would be upsetting that I just did all of that if you hadn't. But we also don't have to do anything."

"But I *want* to," Sirius tells him, frustrated. "I *really* want to. Do you—I mean, do you want to?"

"I—well, yes, but it's fine if you can't, or you're not ready and want to wait," Remus murmurs.

"Wait," Sirius repeats. "We can—we can wait."

"We can," Remus confirms. "Until you're ready, Sirius, if you ever are. And if you're not, that's okay."

Sirius licks his lips, nodding slowly. "Alright, we'll wait. I just think I need to get used to feeling like this. I never have before, you know, and that was sort of...something that helped make my position in the Hallow easier. They all think I'm a whore, but I've never even gotten off before."

"You—wait," Remus says, rearing back a little. "You mean you haven't even...when you were alone? *Never?"*

"Like I said, being a sex symbol for these bastards sort of put me off the whole thing," Sirius admits with a bitter smile. He shakes his head. "I was sixteen when I went into the games, Remus. For years, I never even got aroused after that. I didn't even think I could. The first time that I did, I was—I don't know, sort of disgusted? I didn't do anything about it. I never do anything about it. They've made me feel like…I can't, or else I'll just be what they believe I am."

Remus looks stricken, then—angry? His jaw firms, and he slides his hand down to cup Sirius' chin firmly between his fingers, holding him in place as he stares at him with startling intensity. "They took your acceptance of pleasure away from you."

At those words, Sirius feels his heart clench. Hoarsely, he confesses, "Yeah, they did."

"Do you want it back?" Remus asks.

"Yes," Sirius whispers.

"You can have it. You can take it. That's *yours,* Sirius, and no one gets to decide how you feel about it," Remus declares. "We don't have to do anything, ever, but if you want to, when you're ready, you're allowed to let yourself feel good."

"Okay," Sirius breathes out, his mouth dry. He drops his gaze back to Remus' mouth. "We can—I mean, can we still kiss? I liked the kissing. Very much."

Remus chuckles, his gaze warm. "Yes, you made that abundantly clear. I just so happen to like it, too. Very much. So, that's what we'll do. That's all we'll do."

That's what they do, just that, and Sirius clenches the sheets between his hands and lets Remus slowly, oh so slowly, coax him away from his shame, leaving him in shambles from kiss after kiss after kiss—and all he can think about is the moon and the stars, how they can't steal them or keep them, but it's worth it to love them anyway.

That's this, he thinks.

That's this.

That's us.

Chapter End Notes

see, wasn't that...nicer, for the most part?

i saw a lot of comments coming for sirius thinking he was gonna do something majorly stupid, but yall gotta give my love more credit than that. to be fair, he did make it clear he WOULD do something stupid, and in the long-run, the rule change is...technically stupid, as far as the trouble it will cause. but it's a win for the good guys, for now. everyone say thank you, sirius <3

anyway, sirius playing slughorn like a fiddle!!! an icon!!! he's so smart, i love him. ten years he's spent learning how to perfectly manipulate people—Hallows, specifically—and he instantly did what he had to do. can't blame him there. of course, it will have consequences, but we see those later.

dorcas and marlene... the fact that dorcas ran FOUR MILES to go to marlene as soon as her tributes died. like, she cares so, so much—all the lies and secrecy comes from a place of her trying to protect people and do the right thing, while still trying to balance her responsibilities in a brewing war. and after all of that, just for them to mutually friendzone each other... it's a rough day for the dorlene girlies 😔 REST ASSURED, this is not the end of them, i promise! just friends, my ass. not on MY watch.

the grief and banners playing in the night sky was depressing, admittedly. even worse because james was passed out, so he didn't even get to see vanity one last time :/ oh, and he also missed the rule change, so he doesn't even get to be excited about that, at least. poor babe. i do love him, really.

next: one of my favorite moments in the books is when the rule change happens and katniss, in the middle of a death arena with danger surrounding her at all sides, just literally starts shouting peeta's name at the top of her lungs 😭😭😭 like, don't get me

wrong, i love her to pieces, but that was so STUPID lmaooo. i only adored her more for it, though, and i couldn't blame her for it either.

i was so, so excited to give regulus his own version of that Endearing Idiot Moment. this man really thought he could walk on water for five seconds he can't even SWIM and he was just like: james! and then he immediately started running. look at that little idiot in love go. im so incredibly fond of him.

then sirius returning to the suite and being fucking ECSTATIC. i don't wanna see one soul shaming him for daring to be happy while regulus and james are still having it rough. leave him alone, he's earned the reprieve, dammit 😭😭😭 this man has been SUFFERING nonstop, let him be happy for once, i say, as if did not write the suffering.

i love wolfstar being flirty, sue me. they're so cute, i wanna put them in my pocket. the whole talk about the scars was very revealing—for one, we got more hints to remus' past (being punished A LOT in his district before he was ever even captured, but the question remains: why?) and we also got sirius calling remus his moon, which im admittedly weak for, ngl. i knew id find some way to slip that in there eventually.

sirius' relationship to sex/desire is complex due to a mixture of the issues the Hallow gave him and his sexuality—he's demisexual in this, which gets expanded on more later—so this was a Very Important discussion for remus and sirius to have. im not gonna praise remus for not pushing and reassuring sirius, because that's quite literally the bare minimum and what EVERYONE should do, but it does further implement trust in between them—specifically sirius, in this case. idk, i just love how healthy they are.

really, objectively, sirius and remus are the healthiest relationship in this so far, and they're not even technically together. can't steal the moon, can't keep the stars—it's fucking tragic, isn't it?

nonetheless, they got to make out and flirt and be happy and it's WHAT THEY DESERVE!!!

right, let me do numbers. since they're so low now ( ), ill just do the remaining tributes (aka i don't wanna write them all out and seeing vanity's name in the list makes me feel immense guilt):

tributes remaining: 5
james
regulus
bernice
peter
axus

(side note: i just want to think everyone again for the comments/feedback/support. i haven't replied to all, especially on the rougher chapters, because i usually hide from massive amounts of anxiety, BUT i do read them all, and i can't thank everyone enough for how kind and lovely you've all been <3)

alright, we're back to the regular schedule, so there is indeed another two day wait. i will see everyone on tuesday!!! and yes, we will see regulus and james next chapter.

The Search

Chapter Notes

hello, hello!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-references to past graphic depictions of violence
-suicidal thoughts/idolization (not outright stated, but very heavily themed/implied, just from a place of grief, and it's not acted on at all)
-unspecified drugs/someone being high (it's medicinal)
-depictions of injury/pain
EDIT: mentions descriptions of needles shown/being used

See the end of the chapter for more notes

James wakes up.

For the first time in his life, he experiences what it's like to wish he hadn't.

There was a time when James understood that feeling from an outsider's perspective only, and it had made him ache then, seeing Sirius wake up and face instant regret that he had to. Sometimes, Sirius would cry himself awake, and just cry, and keep crying, and there was nothing James could do but sit with him and wait for the tears to pass. Hold him. Rub his back. Murmur soft words of encouragement and reassurance that James is quite sure Sirius never actually heard anyway. But he still said them. He always said them.

Maybe it's selfish and irrational, but James is angry, because Sirius isn't here to do that for him. Right now, at this moment, the only person James wants is his best friend, no one else.

It's infuriating that Sirius isn't close by when James needs him, because James is always, *always* there when Sirius needs him. He knows, logically, that this isn't Sirius' fault, and yet he's still upset with him anyway. James wants to yell at him, and shove him, and yank on him until they collapse together so that James can curl up against him and weep. James misses him so much that it feels like being ripped in half.

James has never known waking up to be a painful process, and now he doesn't think he'll ever forget. He can't even imagine a time when it won't hurt anymore. If one suffers consistently

enough, that's all they know.

Happiness only leaves behind memories, and those can fade away; pain leaves behind scars, and those never really do.

It doesn't help that he's waking up in *physical* pain as well. His leg fucking hurts. It's the first physical thing he becomes aware of, the fire and ache throbbing in his thigh. Looking down at where he's wrapped it with a torn-off portion of his shirt, he can see it brown, black, and red with dirt and blood.

James averts his gaze, because he doesn't even want to look at it. He knows it's bad. Really fucking bad, in fact. He also knows it's a bigger problem than he's equipped to deal with.

People know their bodies, and they know when something is wrong. James? Well, he can tell that this injury is bad. Not only does it hurt, but it's affecting him in other ways besides the site of the wound. He's running hot, and he feels tired, and his head is fucking pounding something awful. The cold night alone with no fire or blanket surely didn't help, and now he's still trembling and sweating at the same time, which is a very bad sign. He knows that. He knows something is wrong.

The thing is, he doesn't really…care.

That's the thing about waking up and wishing you hadn't; you don't really care about the possibility that you might fall asleep and never wake up again. James almost welcomes the thought, and when it was Sirius dealing with that, nothing terrified him more. When it's him, it hardly seems to matter.

Waking up comes with remembrance. Despite the nightmares that plagued him through the night, giving him no reprieve even in sleep, being awake is somehow worse. All of the events from the previous day seem more real when he's awake.

Hodge.

Vanity.

Irene.

Mathias.

The weight of loss is nearly unbearable. It hurts more than his leg. It hurts more than the loneliness. It hurts more than anything he's ever felt in his life.

There's so much guilt, so much anger, and he doesn't know what to do with it all. He can't rewind time and go back to stop it all from happening; he can't save them, any of them. What was the point of it all? They went to that cave, and for what? James made Vanity upset with him, and why? Regulus promised Vanity a blanket to survive the night, and she didn't even live to use it. So, what was the point?

If the arena has taught James anything, it's the reality of one pointless death right after the next. That's all it is here, really. Plans that don't work. Choices that lead to loss. Every move they make is senseless, because they were always going in one direction anyway, even from the start.

James is furious with himself, because what did he think was going to happen? The goal was to get Regulus home, wasn't it? He always knew everyone else was going to die, so what right does he have to be upset about it now? He avoided looking at it directly, unable to face it fully, and it ended with him here.

It's the sixth day, there are five people remaining, and James does not care. He's awake, and he wishes he wasn't. He has the vial of Vespa's venom in hand, and he refuses to let it go. He's in pain, and he can't remember what it was like not to be.

"Happy birthday, Hodge," James whispers, and he closes his eyes, letting himself drift off back to feverish, fitful sleep.

~•~

Regulus jerks awake at the sound of a bush rustling in the distance. His eyes snap open as he grips his dagger tight and flings himself up, heart racing, on edge in seconds.

It's just a fox dashing out of the undergrowth.

Exhaling, Regulus slowly lowers his dagger and waits for his heart to calm. He reaches out to shake James awake, unsure how he even managed to sleep through Regulus waking in a panic, and then his hand hits the earth—because James isn't there. Regulus swivels his head and stares at the empty ground beside him, where James isn't.

Oh.

Right.

In seconds, Regulus is on his feet, rolling up his blanket to put back in his bag. He wastes no time in getting a move on, more clear-headed today than he was the one prior. He curses himself internally for being so rash in trying to find James last night, because now he has to backtrack.

The rule change flickers through his mind, and the mere memory makes his heart jump, just like he did when he heard it. At that moment, a part of him dared to believe that James was alive, because that rule—well, he has no doubts that the people watching would love nothing more than to see James and Regulus make it home. Most people prefer happy endings to their love stories. Personally, Regulus doesn't believe in such things, but he's more than willing to use everyone else's naivety to his advantage.

As for the others, Regulus isn't allowing himself to think about it. He wasn't as close to Vanity, Irene, and Mathias as James was, but that doesn't mean he's entirely unaffected by their deaths. But, if losing Evan has taught him one thing, it's that giving into your grief inside this arena will either kill you, or make you wish you were dead—both of which are recipes for disaster in a place where death is a real possibility.

He'll deal with everything when they've won. When they've made it. When the arena is nothing but a memory. He can't do it now, can't sit down and let the weight of it all settle on him, because he fears that it might crush him and make it nearly impossible to get back up. But here? They can't do that, not if they want to survive, and Regulus is *determined* to survive.

He always has been from the very beginning, but now that feeling is much more potent. Maybe that's because he's going to be fighting for more than just himself.

First, he has to fucking *find James.*

Regulus is tired. He's running on very little sleep, and he's also dealing with his bruises and

soreness from the fight with Bernice yesterday, but he doesn't let that stop him. He keeps going, heading back in the direction he knows Axus dragged James into the forest.

When it was dark, Regulus really just picked a direction and went on blind hope that he would simply come across James, but of course it wouldn't be so simple. Now, in the daylight, when he reaches the part of the woods Axus was pulling James through, he can see he went the wrong way.

See, when pulling a grown man through the forest, that tends to leave a trail. An obvious one.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus begins to follow it.

~•~

The next time James wakes up, he's thirsty. He can't remember the last time he had something to drink. Yesterday? When they all shared a meal together, right?

James wishes they all stayed in that cave. Maybe they could have done something else. Maybe they could have built traps instead of a bridge, and when the death eaters got too close, they would have been dealt with. They could have gone back to get the bear trap, if it was still there. They could have built nets and just released Vespa to deal with whoever was caught. They could have—well, they could have done so many other things than what they actually did.

What is it they say about hindsight?

And then what? Regulus asks in his head.

Right, that. *That* little niggling problem. No more death eaters, so what would come next in this dreadful scenario? Like Regulus said, they couldn't all play pacifists forever. Couldn't just settle in the cave and live out the rest of their days in perfect harmony. The gamemakers wouldn't have stood for it. They would have found a way to encourage violence and more death. Again, Regulus asks *and then what?*

"I don't know," James rasps. "I didn't know then and I still don't know now. I don't have the answers. I'm sorry, but I never had the answers. All I was sure about was you."

And now? Regulus asks. *What now, James?*

Closing his eyes again, James whispers, "I don't know that either. I don't know anything."

~•~

Regulus comes across a caved-in hole in the ground, like a tunnel. There's a dried puddle of blood around it and mounds of dirt with claw marks like someone was trying desperately to climb out of the hole. There are patches of hair as well, and when Regulus picks it up, he realizes it's Axus'.

He blinks. Who the fuck tore out some of Axus' hair? All he can think is that Axus fell in this hole and got into a fight—a brutal one, by the looks of things. Was it James? That doesn't make much sense, honestly, because he's not entirely sure James would have been *able* to fight and get back out of the hole, especially if Axus survived. Then again, people do nearly impossible things when they're trying to survive, so…maybe?

After further investigation, Regulus can make out the signs of a fight as well as a trail leading away. He *thinks* there's three sets of footprints, which means someone else was here.

It comes to him suddenly, the memory of Juniper absolutely *wrecking* a fucking dummy in the training room every day. His eyebrows shoot up as he looks around slowly, and he can't help but be impressed and mildly disturbed. From the looks of things, Juniper absolutely beat the fuck out of Axus.

She still lost, though. Axus had a weapon as soon as James freed himself and got away, so they had the advantage in the end. Juniper was only sixteen and quite a small girl, while Axus had at least five years on her and was more developed. Even with their small frame and stature, they managed to drag James this far into the forest with seemingly no issue.

"Went out fighting, didn't you?" Regulus murmurs, swiveling his dagger through his fingers with a muted sigh. He looks at the dried spot of blood and grimaces. "Axus has a lot to answer for. They'll answer, I promise you that."

That's really the only solace Regulus can offer, at this point. To all those that are gone, to all the families suffering loss, that's the only thing left they have to hope for. Vengeance.

Regulus doesn't think he killed Quinn to avenge Evan. It was just—instinct. An immediate reaction. She attacked him, so he responded, and he killed her. He wonders if her family would like to see him dead for killing her. What about Avery's? What about Irene's? Do they blame him? He can't shake the guilt of Irene's death, even though she asked for it.

Swallowing, Regulus forces the thoughts aside. No thinking about Irene, or Quinn, or Avery. No thinking about Evan, because that hurts the worst, even now. The most important thing is getting to James, so he stands up.

There's a clear path off to the side that Regulus is quite sure was James. For one thing, the trail is uneven like whoever made it couldn't move steadily. For another, there's smears of blood on leaves and trees, as well little trails of it that no doubt dribbled down his leg. Surely Axus could have followed this.

Well, they might not have been able to if Juniper was keeping them busy in a hole. James, in his panic, probably didn't even know that Juniper was in there, because even dazed and injured, he would have tried to help her, no doubt. No, he must have wrenched the hook from his leg as soon as Axus fell in the hole, then scrambled to his feet and ran as much as he could on his bad leg. Regulus is assuming that, at some point, he found somewhere to hide where Axus couldn't find him.

Regulus will. He'll search every nook and cranny of this forest if he has to, and so he starts doing just that, following the trail. Along the way, even though James likely wouldn't have been able to climb, Regulus never fails to look up.

Evan would be proud of him for that, he thinks.

~•~

The next time James comes to, he feels significantly worse than he did before. His leg hurts so bad that even *breathing* makes it worse, and he groans through clenched teeth the one and only time he makes the mistake of gently prodding above where the hook went through his leg. Just a tiny push from his fingers makes his eyes sting with tears.

"Sirius," James whispers, breathing hard as he tilts his head back, blinking blearily at the roof of the cave. *"Please."*

He can't figure out why Sirius hasn't helped him yet. The only option that James can think of is that he can't afford the medicine, or the sponsors aren't willing to send it, but James is in so much pain that he can only shamefully resort to begging. He's so confused, because he *knows* Sirius would do anything necessary to help him right now.

Still, there's nothing. James can only sit there, in a cold sweat, shivering and whimpering every other breath. It's agony. The sort of agony that makes him think he'd rather just cut his leg off than deal with this fucking pain. Shit, it *hurts.*

Due to the discomfort, James can't get back to sleep. He's left with no choice but to feel it. There's also his thirst to deal with as well; his mouth is so dry. He's not hungry, at least. In fact, he doesn't think he could stomach anything at all. His appetite has completely vanished, despite the fact that he *knows* his body is showing signs of needing food for fuel, yet the idea of eating makes him feel more nauseous than he already does.

If James had a nightmare scenario, it would be exactly this. Between the loneliness, the grief, and the pain, he can't imagine anything worse to suffer.

No, that's not true.

James' brain is fucking awful, because it comes up with worse things easily. Regulus dead. His parents dead. Sirius dead. There's nothing in this world that could be worse than that, and James would suffer this for eternity if it was what it took to keep them alive and safe.

Desperate not to think about that anymore, because he can feel an anxiety attack coming on just from the mere thought, he attempts to think about literally anything else. Of course, this sends him into a spiral about Vanity, Hodge, Irene, and Mathias. Even Willa and Juniper. Evan. Mulciber. Avery. Dylan. There are nineteen people dead. James himself has killed three of them. How did he get here?

What about Peter? He's still alive out there somewhere, isn't he? James remembers seeing him beaten and passed out on the ground, but after what happened with Vanity, he completely checked out of his surroundings and all that happened. James didn't come back to himself until he heard Regulus screaming his name. He doesn't even know what happened to Irene and Mathias. He can only hope they didn't suffer.

So, where is Peter? Is he alright? James hasn't heard a cannon, so he's still alive, but is he hurt? What happened to him? He never set the third fire, so James is sure the death eaters found him before he managed to. Did they just figure out the plan and drag Peter, beaten and bloody, along

with them? Why didn't they kill him? James is so grateful they didn't kill him.

He still has to die, the Regulus in his head reminds him.

For the first time in James' life, he wishes Regulus would shut up. Yes, obviously he knows that Peter has to fucking die, because the goal is still the same. Even now, the most important thing is getting Regulus home, which means twenty-three other people have to die, including Peter.

Including James himself.

It's a wild, freeing feeling to realize it, but it hits James that, at some point, he won't be dealing with all of this anymore. One way or another, he's going to be free of this fucking arena, even in death. Due to his pain, his suffering, his grief, and this heavy depression he can't shake off, James is so relieved by the thought that he nearly weeps.

The sound of a soft chime makes James turn his head, drawn out of his admittedly morbid thoughts. He blinks, not entirely sure if he's hallucinating or if what he's seeing is actually real.

A silver box comes floating through the mouth of the cave, drifting in with a tiny parachute holding it up. It bobs and weaves through the air, rocking further down, and James swallows as he watches it land gently next to him. It settles on the ground with a dull clatter.

Carefully, James reaches over with a wince to snag the string of the parachute, dragging the box over to him. It's not too big, but it's not small either. The lid opens easily, and James blinks down at what's inside in surprise. There's a bottle of water and a syringe that has a small dosage of something in it.

Okay, that's…not what James was expecting, if he's honest, but alright. He shakes his head slightly and pulls the water out first, taking a few careful sips and letting his eyes flutter shut at the relief of it. Fuck, that's good. Clean and refreshing. He wants to guzzle it, but he doesn't know how long he'll be stuck here, so he plans to savor it.

Hesitantly, James goes for the syringe next, eyebrows furrowed as he lifts it out. It's a very small dosage in a large syringe, just at the twenty milligram mark, and the needle is uncomfortably long. Whatever medicine is in there, it's clear.

With a frown, James peeks in the box again to find a white card at the bottom, and his hands tremble a bit when he lifts it out, because it's *Sirius.* A message from Sirius. Undeniable confirmation that he's watching, that he's close by, in his own way. James feels his heart jump as he reads it.

In the vein in your arm. For the pain. I'm here.

That's it. That's all it says, and James still starts crying anyway. He nearly drops the syringe, but fumbles to catch and sit it aside carefully, and then he covers his face with both hands and just fucking *weeps.* He can't help it.

"I miss you," James chokes out, dropping his hands, because more than the pain, that's what gets to him the most. Sirius can fix the pain, and he can't *really* fix that he's not here for James to reach out and touch, to talk to, but those two words at the end mend something in him, at least a little. *I'm here.* He's not, actually, but James knows what he means. He's watching; he's listening; he's here for James as much as he can be from where he really is. "I—I miss you so much, Sirius."

Of course there's no reply, but James can close his eyes and picture Sirius in his mind. All their shared looks and their inside jokes; the way they can practically read each other's minds just from meeting one another's eyes; how they can have entire discussions through a simple touch. He can still hear the last things Sirius ever said to him, a steady source of comfort, even now.

"Thank you," James breathes out, his hands shaking as he reaches out to grab the syringe again.

James has absolutely no idea how to do this, really, but he's gotten blood drawn before, so he tries to copy how that went. He eases one arm out of his coat and squints down at the bend of his elbow. Well, either it works, or it doesn't.

With care, James makes a fist and lines up the needle with his vein, then pushes in until he feels like it's enough, and *then* slowly presses the plunger down. There's a small dot of blood when he pulls the needle out and sits the syringe aside, which he wipes away. He blinks, but doesn't feel different.

Okay, so maybe he fucked that up. That's on him. At least Sirius tried, and really, James is just grateful to have heard from him. And bonus—there's water.

James eases his way back into his coat, zipping it back up and slipping the vial in his pocket, then

reaches for the water. He sips on that slowly, dropping the syringe in the box and sitting it aside, keeping the card in hand as he runs his thumb over it with reverence. He touches it like it's treasure.

He's still looking at it, lost in doing that for several minutes, when he suddenly becomes aware of the lack of pain. It makes him blink and lift his head, mildly startled by the sensation, because *fuck,* he didn't realize how desperately he needed that until he got it. Oh, that's… That's really good.

"Oh, shit," James whispers, his lips parting on a soft sigh as the medicine *really* kicks in, and he goes from not only having no pain to feeling absurdly amazing.

Like he's floating.

Like he's weightless.

Like he's made of light.

James opens his eyes and tips his head back, watching the ceiling of the cave swirl above him, quite literally seeing stars. Oh, Sirius. James loves Sirius. That's his best friend. The *best* fucking friend anyone could ask for.

"The best. You're the best. Oh, I love you so much," James mumbles breathlessly, his head lolling from side-to-side as he giggles and lets his eyes slip shut.

Sirius isn't here to reply, but James easily knows what his response would be. Sirius loves him, too. There's no doubt in James' mind, *especially* now. When James falls asleep again, he does so feeling very loved.

Also *very* high.

~•~

Regulus is starting to get worried. It's past mid-day now, starting to creep closer to evening, and he

refuses not to find James before nightfall. He's out here somewhere, no way to make a fire, no blanket, no food and no water.

Well, no, maybe that's not true. Maybe Sirius has sent him something, because Regulus knows deep down in his bones that Sirius will *not* let James die, no matter what it takes, especially not with the rule change. Still, Regulus would feel better actually *seeing* that James is well for himself.

Following the trail only got him so far. James, at some point, must have stopped to wrap his leg or something, because the blood trail eventually ended, even when the less obvious signs of someone passing through didn't. The broken twigs, the random footprint, things such as that.

Unfortunately, the trail eventually broke out into a clearing, and that's no doubt where Axus lost James, because that's where Regulus does, too. He can't pick a trail back up, so now he's just wandering around the area, looking for any place James could have hid. So far, he's found nothing.

Regulus keeps an eye out for Axus, in case they've decided to come looking for James again, but he sincerely doubts that's going to be the first thing on their mind. No, he'd bet a lot on the chances that Axus is out there looking to meet up with Bernice again. Safety in numbers, of course. The last two remaining death eaters; yeah, they'll be together, no doubt.

Peter is a wild card. Regulus wouldn't have assumed that Peter would work with the death eaters *before* the announcement, but Bernice is from his district. If they survive, they can go home; no different from James and Regulus, and Regulus knows just how enticing the idea of that is. Without that rule change, Regulus wouldn't even consider the possibility that Peter might be a future problem. In fact, he would dare to think that Peter would be helping him and James, in the end.

Now? He's not so sure.

Heaving a sigh, Regulus carefully skids down an incline and mutters under his breath, "James, where *are* you?"

Of course, there's no reply, so Regulus can only continue to make his way in circles, carefully pushing the perimeter as he looks—everywhere, basically. He loses more daylight to this and grows frustrated, genuinely worrying he's not going to find James before tonight, at least until he finds a footprint.

Regulus has been careful, literally observing everything with keen eyes, so he doesn't miss the tread in the dirt. The sight of it makes his heart jump, because there's a one-in-four chance of that being James, and he's quite sure James is in this area.

Slowly, he looks up and swivels his head, taking everything in around him as he goes in the direction the footprint was pointing towards. Less than five minutes later, Regulus sees a mound off to the side that looks promising, and he climbs his way up the incline. When he reaches the peak, he doesn't see much at all, not at first.

But there. Barely even noticeable. Tucked behind a cluster of trees, there's just the tiniest sliver of a cave that he can only just make out, even with how hard he's looking.

Regulus drops down over the side of the mound and moves forward, dagger in hand. It's quiet outside, excluding the creak of the trees and the gentle sounds of wildlife, particularly songbirds that whistle at one another. When he was young, he used to wonder what they talked about.

No sound comes from the cave, and the entrance is so small that he has to duck down and slowly ease his way inside, grateful when the roof immediately lifts as he goes further in and lets himself straighten up. It's dim inside, but the sunlight pours in from behind him, and it feels like an electric shock runs through him the moment he sees James.

He's there.

He's actually there.

"James," Regulus blurts out, moving forward immediately, gripped with mild panic when James doesn't respond, even though he's visibly breathing. He looks rough, and the wrap around his leg has bloodstains. There's a white card held in his limp grip, and Regulus can see a sponsor box on the other side of him, by his hip. Regulus sits his dagger down and reaches out to cup James' cheeks, turning his head and lightly tapping one of them. "James. Hey, James, wake up. *James."*

It takes another minute and a rougher smack, but James' eyes do eventually flutter open. He's hot to the touch, a bit sweaty, and his eyes are glazed where they're held only half-open. He breaks out into a smile and mumbles, "Sirius. You're here. You said you were, you said…"

Regulus blinks. James has never, not once in his life under *any* circumstances, mistaken Regulus for Sirius. "What? Hey, look at me, James. It's Regulus."

"Regulus," James whispers, his eyebrows tugging together, but the lucidity in his eyes are nonexistent. "Sirius, I promised. I'm still—I'm gonna do it. I'll get him home, okay? I'll make sure Regulus gets home. Whatever it takes."

It feels like Regulus' entire body goes cold. His hands slip off James' face, and he rocks back, staring at him as his ears ring. Regulus doesn't breathe for a long moment, can't manage it. He just stares at James, who blinks slowly and looks so sincere that it's painful. No. Not—no. That's not. No.

No.

It's not true.

That's not possible.

Regulus refuses to—no. He shakes his head, because there's no fucking way. James said—he *said* he would make it home. He said that, didn't he? He said…

All he ever said was that he would do what he needed to do. Regulus assumed that meant fighting to get home, because that's the *logical conclusion,* for fuck's sake. The idea that James meant—the chance that, this whole time, he's been—

No.

No fucking chance.

No, Regulus doesn't believe that. He *refuses* to even entertain that thought, because it is the single most ridiculous display of stupidity that he could think of—and he legitimately *never* even thought of it, because it's *that* foolish. Regulus knows James is a fucking idiot, but there's no way he would be *this* devastatingly obtuse and brainless. Absolutely not.

Clenching his jaw, Regulus reaches out to grab the white card from James' slack fingers. James makes a fussy sound and tries to grab it back, but Regulus snatches it away and swats James on the back of his hand, which makes him let out a soft, sad sound like a whirring machine slowly losing

power. He looks at Regulus with big eyes full of betrayal.

"Sirius, that's mine," James murmurs petulantly.

Regulus ignores him and glances at the card, reading it, and then he frowns and leans over James' lap to peer into the box. He wrenches back and scowls up at the ceiling. "You fucking *drugged him?* Are you *insane?* He's already vulnerable as it is, and now he's high as a kite. You sent him something for the pain, but nothing to actually *heal him?"*

"Who are you yelling at?" James asks, trying to stealthily snag the card from Regulus' fingers. "I don't think anyone is here."

"Oh, just—" Regulus huffs and flicks the card at James, who beams as soon as he has it in his hands again. Shaking his head, Regulus once again leans over James' lap to grab the water bottle, then takes his bag off, digging through it to find the cloth. Once he has it, he focuses on James, who has his eyes closed as he smiles dopily and drags the edge of the card over his cheek. "James."

"Hm?"

"I'm going to take a look at your leg, alright?"

"Mhm."

"It might hurt."

James cracks open one eye and says, "You'll never hurt me, Sirius."

"Right," Regulus replies flatly, taking a deep breath before slowly letting it out. He huffs out a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he scoots down to James' leg. "Brilliant. I wasn't aware this entire experience could get worse, and yet here we are. James, do me a favor and just—don't talk to me."

"But I miss you," James tells him.

Regulus sighs.

~•~

James is going to have to reevaluate his ironclad certainty that Sirius would never hurt him, because Sirius is hurting him. He's doing something to James' leg that hurts *a lot,* and also, Sirius is suddenly being so mean to him?

He's never done that before.

"You're being really mean," James announces, just in case he doesn't realize he's doing it.

Sirius just rolls his eyes, but like, in a mean way. Not like him at all. It's really attractive. "Well, if you'd *hold still…"*

"I'm trying, but it hurts."

"I did tell you that it would. Stop whining."

"When did you start being so *rude?"* James sputters, flinching when Sirius does another painful thing to his leg. Oh, what is he doing? James really hopes he stops soon.

"When did you turn into a big baby?" Sirius shoots back.

James huffs a weak laugh and leans his head back, gazing at Sirius with a lopsided smile. "Regulus says that to me, you know. He called me *baby* once, in a cute way. Isn't that cute? Well, you might not think so, but it was really cute. *He's* really cute. I—oh, you have to—you need to be here so he can see you. Don't leave until he's seen you. He probably won't show it, but he misses you as much as you miss him."

"Shut up, I do not," Sirius grumbles.

"Sirius, it's *me,"* James reminds him, exasperated. "I know you miss him. Nothing wrong with that, you know. He's your little brother; it only makes sense. I miss him, too. I mean, in a very different way, but you get my point."

"I'm literally begging you to stop opening your mouth and letting out relentless stupidity," Sirius says, his voice strained.

"That was really mean," James mumbles.

Sirius sighs. "Yes, you've mentioned."

"You know who else is really mean to me? Speaking of your brother," James says with a wistful sigh. Sirius huffs a soft laugh, and James briefly wonders when he started being so quiet. "But, you know, it's okay when he does it. Actually, I really enjoy when he does it, because then at least he's paying attention to me. Not ignoring me. That's pathetic, isn't it?"

"Yes," Sirius confirms bluntly.

"He is nice, though. Sometimes. Like, he gave me a parting gift—not here in the arena, I mean, and it was—" James cuts off with a sputter, because Sirius clamps a firm hand over his mouth, making it impossible to continue.

"Why don't you keep that to yourself, yeah?" Sirius asks, then coughs and slowly drags his hand away. James blinks at him, confused, and Sirius shakes his head. "That's really no one's business but those involved, James."

James stares at him incredulously. "But I tell you everything."

"Seriously?" Sirius breathes out, as if disgusted. "He's my brother. You have to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, I didn't tell you. I wasn't going to, because I was coming here, and now I'm guilty about it." James pauses, then purses his lips. "Actually, not guilty about *doing it,* just guilty about not telling you, or just actively choosing not to tell you. It wasn't—we didn't do anything, really. Well—"

"Okay, James," Sirius cuts in sharply, and James blinks at him, shutting his mouth slowly. "That's enough. Let's never talk about it, yeah? I *really* don't want to talk about it."

"You do have a point about him being your brother. You're not even going to want the details," James says, giving Sirius a significant look. "Just as long as you get the point that there are details to give, because *something* happened."

Sirius scoffs and mutters, "Barely anything happened, but okay." He heaves a sigh and shakes his head when he looks up and finds James frowning at him. "No more talking about Regulus, alright?"

"But I miss him, too," James mumbles.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Sirius declares in exasperation, then he does another painful thing that makes James whine and try to squirm away from it.

"Fuck!" James gasps out. "Sirius, if you do that again, I swear I'll just—I'll—"

"You'll what?" Sirius asks sarcastically. "What exactly can you do at the moment, James? Nothing. So, shut up and stop moving. I'm almost through with cleaning this. It's—I mean, it's really bad. It's infected, which is…"

"Sirius?" James murmurs, his anger evaporating as he watches Sirius swallow, his face grim. He looks upset, and James can't stand by and do nothing about that. "Hey, it's fine."

"It's really not," Sirius rasps, then tips his head back. "Do you see this? *I* can't do anything about it. He needs help. Drugging him doesn't fucking *fix* him. Can you just—I mean, fucking hell, what are you waiting for?"

James looks up, but he only sees the top of his cave. He leans in and murmurs, "Sirius, who are you talking to? It's—I promise it's just a hallucination. It's not real."

"What?" Sirius shoots him a strange look, but he seems ultimately distracted as he leans back and unzips his coat. He takes his dagger—wait, is that—

"How did you get Regulus' dagger?" James asks.

Sirius ignores him, which is unlike him and extremely upsetting in every way, but he *is* busy, to be fair. He's slicing off the bottom part of his shirt all the way around, big enough that the scar on his side shows. Wait, when did he get a scar on his side? He has a scar on his stomach (and many others elsewhere), but not on his side.

James snaps his hand out and snatches Sirius' shirt up further, looking for the scar he *knows* is there, but it's gone. Confused, he lifts his gaze to find Sirius looking annoyed as he swats James' hand away and pushes his shirt back down. It doesn't fall all the way, due to the portion he cut all the way around.

It takes a moment, but James realizes that Sirius' hair is shorter than it's supposed to be. It's—he's not…right. There's something—off. James blinks, then blinks harder, reaching out again to gently pat the side of Sirius' head, his hair, and he flicks his gaze up to meet James' eyes, and oh.

Oh, that's not Sirius.

Those aren't Sirius' eyes. Despite the similarities—nearly the same exact shape and eye-color—those eyes belong to only one person. The whole world warps in and out of focus, but there he is, coming through clear as a bell. Regulus.

"Oh, hey," James murmurs. "You're not—you were never Sirius. He was never here."

Regulus shakes his head, and for a moment, he almost looks apologetic, which may have something to do with the fact that James is utterly heartbroken that his best friend isn't here right now. "No, James."

"I'm—I think I'm really high," James says solemnly.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty sure you're coming down—or starting to, at least," Regulus murmurs. "Try to hold still for me, would you? I'm wrapping your leg again."

"M'kay," James mumbles.

Sirius isn't here. He was never here. Oh, James misses him. But Regulus is here, isn't he? Unless *he's* a hallucination of some sort. At this point, James wouldn't put anything out of the realm of possibility; these are some very, very good drugs. They even help make it hurt *a lot* less than it would without them when Regulus wraps his leg again firmly. It does hurt, but it's not excruciating, unbearable agony that makes him scream. At most, it makes him groan and curl forward, grinding his teeth through the pain, and then it passes like a wave breaking along the shore, receding out again when the magical medicine finally takes over once more.

"There, I'm done torturing you for now. You're fine. You'll be fine," Regulus tells him gently. "Just —just rest, for now. Sleep it off, alright?"

"You came and found me," James whispers, gazing at him through a haze, so tired and still confused, but the idea that Regulus would come for him makes him inordinately happy.

"Of course I did," Regulus whispers back.

~•~

What was Sirius thinking? *Drugging* James? In the middle of the fucking hunger games? That might be the most idiotic thing Regulus has ever known his brother to do, and this is *Sirius* he's talking about, so that's saying a lot. Sirius once flipped a cigarette in the air and tried to catch it with his mouth *while it was lit,* and kept doing it until he could actually consistently manage it, no matter how much it burned him.

Though, in fairness, he can still do that trick to this day.

And, in fairness to this, Sirius *does* come with the knowledge of everyone's position in the arena, which reassures Regulus a bit, because he knows Sirius would never put James at such risk under the influence while others are nearby. In any case, James' injury is really bad, so Regulus doesn't doubt that James was in a lot of pain. There's no way Sirius could ignore that and do nothing about it.

The only thing Regulus doesn't understand is why Sirius hasn't sent medicine to *heal* him. Not just take his pain away, but properly fix him. Some of the salve they had before would go a long way right now, surely. Regulus knows it has to be very fucking expensive, but Sirius is *Sirius.* If anyone can get it done, it's him, so why hasn't he yet?

James isn't doing well. He's been sleeping fitfully for hours now, the medicine slowly wearing off over time. He still hasn't woken up, thankfully, but he's been mumbling and groaning in his sleep, his brow furrowed and his face twisted with pain. Despite how sweaty he is, he's trembling like he's cold, and he clearly has a fever. The infection has set in.

Frankly, Regulus isn't entirely sure what to do. He has nothing to heal James, and from what he learned in the training room, James could easily die in as little as three days if sepsis sets in, depending on the severity of his wound. It's been twenty-four hours since he got the injury by this point, so it's a real issue.

Regulus considers his options. He'll do what it takes to get James home with him, because if he dies from infection when they're *this* close to the finish line, Regulus will tear his fucking hair out and probably never forgive himself, or James, or even Sirius. That's not an option. Regulus refuses to let that happen, which means he either has to find some way to heal James, or he has to figure out some way to get James home so he can be healed within the next two days.

Honestly, Regulus was already prepared to go out and kill everyone before, so if that's what it comes to… Yeah, he can do that. It's just Bernice, Axus, and Peter. They all could be in one group, or all separate, or it could be two of them with one alone. Either way, Regulus is pretty sure he can do it. He has his dagger and James' hatchet. If he's quick about it and catches them off-guard, maybe fights through the fear and climbs trees to attack from up high…

It's getting late now, though. Not dark just yet, but the sun is starting to set. Regulus will have to wait until tomorrow. For now, he has to stay here and make sure James doesn't die through the night. But after *that,* Regulus will handle it.

Regulus goes out with James' water bottle and his own water canister to go back to the closest stream he passed on his way here. It's a small one, and it's about twenty minutes away, so it's nearly an hour roundtrip. He stops to gather wood and kindling to start a small fire in the cave along the way, though he's admittedly antsy about being this far from James when he's so vulnerable. Even without the drugs, he's at risk. He can't move, or *fight.*

When Regulus makes it back, James is fine. In fact, he's finally awake, and he's clearly lucid, because he sucks in a sharp breath as soon as Regulus walks in with his hands full.

"Regulus," James breathes out.

Regulus ignores him and crouches down in front of his legs where they stick straight out, slowly setting up the fire for them, which he has no matches to light it with. He'll have to do it by hand.

Okay, so now he regrets tossing all the supplies in a fit of dramatics and murderous rage. He could have at least replaced his matches, but in his defense, he wasn't really in the best place at the time, mentally speaking.

After he sits the water down and sets up the fire to burn later, Regulus finally looks up and stares at James, who is watching him closely. There's something different about him that wasn't there under the influence of drugs; sure, there's pain in his expression from his wound, but what really comes through is the sorrow in his eyes and the grief that carves into every angle of his face. What's more worrying than all of that is the complete lack of spark that James Potter has always, *always* carried with him for as long as Regulus has known him.

Nothing has ever managed to smother that spark, because James is never afraid to be the one who has hope. James won't hesitate to try and find the silver lining. James believes in purpose, and finding meaning in everything, and he does *not* give up. So, seeing him like this makes Regulus' heart *drop.*

"James," Regulus murmurs, shifting to the side to scoot closer to James and scan his face with a frown.

"You're here," James says, and his voice cracks.

It's the voice crack that gets to Regulus, really. He can't help it. Just hearing it causes something to crack within him, and it's immediately obvious that James is very fragile right now. He needs to be handled with caution. "Yes, I'm here."

James swallows thickly and reaches for him, so Regulus goes without complaint, closing the distance so James doesn't have to fold forward too far just to wrap his arms around him and bury his face into Regulus' shoulder. Regulus hugs him back, squeezing his eyes shut the moment he hears James choke out a muffled sob against him. He's shaking.

It's very hard, suddenly, not to break down and weep right along with him. There's so much to cry about. Blood behind his eyelids, stained on his hands, in his mouth. Screams. The sound of cannons. Death, death, so much death.

Regulus blinks harshly and rolls his jaw, releasing a deep, shuddering breath. James is clinging to him tight like he doesn't want to let go, but his leg also doesn't really give him much of a choice in the matter. He makes a low, pained noise and draws back with tear-tracks on his face.

"I've been here for a while now," Regulus murmurs, his fingers quite literally itching with the need to wipe the tears away until he gives in and just—does it. James lets him, leaning forward into his palms. "Do you remember?"

"No," James says, eyebrows furrowed. "Sirius sent me drugs. It gave me weird dreams about him and you. Like—like you were him, but he was really hazy around the edges so I couldn't tell, and then you transformed back into yourself. It was *really* strange, Reg. Very confusing. I can't remember it all, but I can safely say I wasn't in as much pain, so there's that."

Regulus decides now isn't the best time to mention that those weren't exactly dreams, because James was very awake and doing all of that in real time. He clears his throat. "And now? How much pain are you in now? I cleaned and redressed the wound, but it's—it's not looking good, James."

"Doesn't feel good either," James mumbles wearily, glancing down at his leg, then immediately looking away from it. "I'll be fine. Probably. Maybe not. Doesn't really matter, does it?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Regulus asks sharply, a frisson of alarm surging through him. "Of course it matters. It could fucking kill you."

James just stares at him, then huffs a humorless laugh and nods like he's so very exhausted. "Right, well, don't act like that's not helpful for you in the long-run. One less person between you and home, yeah?"

"What?" Regulus snaps. "Fuck you, James. If you think I'm not going to do everything to get you home with me, then you—"

"What?" James cuts in, blinking at him.

Regulus pauses, then frowns. "The announcement. Did you hear the announcement?"

"What announcement?" James asks, visibly confused.

"Oh," Regulus breathes out, deflating a little as he stares at James in horror. He'd wondered, really, why James didn't have that spark, especially with the rule change, even despite the grief and pain he's suffering. Because if James knew he could get home and see his parents again, see Sirius

again, *and* bring Regulus home with him—he *wouldn't* give up. Wouldn't even dream of it. "There's been a rule change. You must have missed it, but two people of the same district can be Victors. We can go home, James. Both of us."

James head tips to the side as his face crumbles, tears *instantly* filling his eyes as he rasps, "No. Is that—are you—please don't be joking, Regulus. If—if you're just—"

"No, no, I swear I'm not. It's real. I promise," Regulus says quickly, hushed, and he reaches out to grab James' hands and squeeze them like maybe that will get the point across better. James' lip is trembling, and he chokes out a harsh breath as he grips Regulus' hands tight. "We can make it. Me and you."

"Oh, fuck. Shit," James whispers, his head ducking forward as he starts crying all over again. Big, deep gasping sobs. He laughs, too, like a man discovering hope for the very first time. Like someone lost in the desert stumbling across a source of water. Like that first flicker of a flame in the deep-dark of the freezing arctic finally, *finally* catching to provide warmth.

"I know," Regulus murmurs, breathless, and he can't stop himself from leaning in to press his face against James' shoulder, feeling the same relief as him.

"We can go home?" James croaks, lifting his head.

Regulus lifts his, too, and their faces are really close together, so he can see in perfect clarity that James' spark is back. It's there, in his eyes, and Regulus' heart flutters at the sight. He swallows and leans away. "Yes, James, we can go home."

~•~

Sirius heaves a sigh, reaching up to rub at his temple, the headache really setting in. *Regulus, you emotionally-constipated little shit,* he thinks. He can't believe he's even upset about this right now, but what the fuck was *that?*

Not only did Regulus completely bypass any intimacy or hint of *past* intimacy with James—yeah, Sirius can take a wild guess of what *something* James was talking about happening between them, though he doesn't really want to—but Regulus also just made that the least romantic reunion in history. A hug? That's all he could do? Not even another stupid forehead kiss or something? Come the fuck on, Regulus is smarter than this; he should be able to work out what the people want.

'The people', as it were, are not very happy at the moment. In fact, everyone is very disappointed that Regulus didn't collapse into James' arms and immediately confess his undying love. Of course *Sirius* knows that Regulus would literally never do that, but *the people* don't. They want what they want, and there won't be any help given to James until they get it.

Frankly, Sirius is very fucking tired and officially at the end of his rope. He told Slughorn that the push Regulus needed was hope, and he honestly thought that would work. Not because Regulus actually hopes for a future with James, but because he's smart enough to work out that everyone really, *really* wants to see their romance enough that they care about a happy ending, which he could use to his advantage. He could be using it to his advantage *right now*.

And, look, Sirius doesn't particularly *want* Regulus to be in this position where he's forced into doing these things that he doesn't want to. In fact, Sirius fucking hates this. It makes him want to tuck Regulus behind him and keep him safe and out of sight as he shouts at anyone who dares to demand anything from him. The last thing Sirius wants is for Regulus to end up like *him.* But, in the same breath, James' survival depends on it.

In situations as dire as this, there's no room to be unwilling to do something it takes to survive. If Regulus doesn't give them what they want, he'll be punished for it. Not only him, but James, too. The worst part is, Sirius doesn't think that Regulus isn't willing to do this. He's pretty sure Regulus would just suck it up and do what it takes, if only he *knew*.

So, as much as Sirius hates it, he's going to have to figure out a way to tell him. Because Regulus needs to know. Because Regulus has to do this if he wants them both to survive.

Sighing, Sirius swivels on the spot, slaps on a broad smile, and crosses the room while cooing, "Joffrey, darling, I think it's time I take you up on your offer."

Chapter End Notes

> welp, we're in the home-stretch now, folks and friends! so let me get into it, i guess.
>
> "I didn't know then and I still don't know now. I don't have the answers. I'm sorry, but I never had the answers. All I was sure about was you." — james potter, the man that you are.... he's so in love, im SICK ☹☹☹
>
> no, because seeing james so defeated by grief/pain is such a horrible thing. like, at the beginning of all this, he always had a smile and was happily flirting with regulus, stress beat-boxing, just generally all-around trying to stay positive. so, to see him like this is fucking devastating. rest assured, he's still james, we'll still see him being

himself, but he's just really struggling right now. considering everything, can't really blame him for that.

also: "you came and found me" "of course i did" — regulus black, the man that YOU are... oh, im SICK. they make me sick. i wanna hug them so bad 😭 the fact that regulus really planned to search that entire arena if he had to, if that's what it took to find james... babe, who are you fooling at this point???

oh, and high james!!! lmaoooo, he just wanted to hold onto the card from the sponsor box and talk to his bestie, that was literally it. enter regulus black, stage left, coming to be a total bitch to him purely because he's WORRIED. nice to see sirius in the arena tho <3

and the confession. james letting slip that the plan was to get regulus home. you know what's hilarious? the fact that regulus literally just went: well, that's stupid and i Don't Like It, so im choosing to believe it's simply not true 😭😭😭 king behavior, honestly. yall are lying if you said you've never had that reaction to something before. regulus went right to denial, and i can't even blame him lmaooo. just: hm, Don't Like That, ive decided its fake because i make the rules.

it will come up again later, though, don't doubt that.

also², JAMES TRYING TO CONFESS THAT REGULUS GOT HIM OFF TO SIRIUS 😭😭😭 HE'S SO DUMB I LOVE HIM. HE REALLY TRIED GOODBYE. listen, james was just trying to be a good bestie, okay? and him talking about how cute regulus is and how much he likes him TO regulus, because he thinks he's talking to sirius. please know that sirius was face-palming while watching that entire interaction

deeply sad that james just wants his best friend, though 😕 like, the fact that james is always there for sirius—has always been there—but sirius COULDN'T be there for james... that shit is devastating to me, because you just KNOW that sirius was also so upset about it.

also³, "regulus, you emotionally-constipated little shit" IM YELLING! GET HIS ASS SIRIUS 😭😭😭 he's so tired. give this man a break. he's literally the epitome of "i have to do everything around here" because he literally does. his back is hurt carrying this team, pretty much.

anyway, that's about it, i think. let me do numbers:

remaining tributes as of this chapter: 5
regulus
james
axus
bernice
peter

i will indeed be updating on thursday!! and ill be back to trying to reply to comments again soon! please know that i do read them all and appreciate every single one of them. i love the theories and feedback; you have no idea what they mean to me. i know it can sometimes feel like yelling into a void, but please know that im one person, and this void is echoing all the love back <3

UPDATING ON THURSDAY

EDIT: i realize belatedly that the "offer" sirius is taking this joffrey fellow up on comes off a certain way and can be genuinely distressing/worrying for some people, so let me reassure everyone!!! back in the earlier chapters (it was chapter 6, which was a while ago), sirius was at a party charming sponsors and basically getting them to promise future donations/support to his tributes. there was one man there named joffrey that sirius basically manipulated into promising an offer of a large sum of money if he ever needed it (yes, sirius is an icon, we been knew), so "taking joffrey up on his offer" is literally just him coming to collect the donation/support that joffrey promised him before, as a sponsor. that's it. sirius will not be coerced into sexual favors EVER in this fic, simply because i don't have the desire/willingness to write that, even if it may seem fitting for this world. my excuse for this is that sirius is literally That Bitch that can make people do what he want without having to do anything other than play into rumors, because i said so. hope that clears it up and sets your minds at ease! okay, see everyone thursday <3

Performance

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-vague hints/undercurrents of suicidal feelings? thoughts? implications? (idk how to explain this one because it's not like, an active thing, if that makes sense? it's very light/vague overall, and it comes from a place of guilt, basically, as well as grief. and no, it's not something that will lead into future problems dealing with suicide/attempted suicide, i promise. it's just a grief/guilt thing and will eventually pass/get better)
-depictions of injury/pain
-angst

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regulus holds up the vial of venom he helped Vanity extract from Vespa, a lump forming in his throat as he turns it between his fingers. James sits next to him in silence, fiddling with the white card, tracing the edge of it with his thumb.

"Do you remember when you said you didn't want me to be changed?" James asks softly.

"Yes," Regulus murmurs.

James nods his head towards the vial. "That changed me."

"Losing Vanity?" Regulus checks.

"Yeah," James confirms.

"What about—" Regulus swallows and meets his gaze, his heart clenching. "You said that who you are, all that you're made of, couldn't be changed. What about that?"

"I'm still me," James whispers. "Just a little less, is all."

Regulus looks away, finding it very difficult to swallow all of a sudden. He genuinely can't think of anything more tragic than that. He can hate James Potter with everything in him, hate all there is of him, but he's never once wished for *less* of James.

James is too much of so many things to ever shrink. He's been this bright, this momentous, since Regulus met him; it's the one consistent thing that never changed, even when Sirius and Regulus himself did. Even when Regulus grew to hate it, he could always count on it. James doesn't deserve this. What Regulus hates more than James is his suffering.

"I killed Irene," Regulus confesses abruptly, reaching out to put the vial back in James' pocket.

"No," James replies immediately, and when Regulus glances at him, he's shaking his head. He instantly doesn't believe it. The sight makes Regulus feel like he could cry.

"Yes, I did," Regulus rasps, and James stares at him, looking right into his eyes. It takes a moment, but James' face falls slack, and Regulus knows he's seen the truth in his eyes. "It was—well, it was a joint effort between me, Mathias, and Axus, I suppose. I had the killing blow, though. Mathias—they didn't mean to, they were aiming for Axus, but they shot Irene in the chest with their crossbow. Axus was fighting Irene, and they turned her into the shot. We, um, took her across the bridge, and that's why I was over there instead of with you. I should have been with you, but I was too busy killing her."

James shakes his head slightly. "I don't understand. You… Regulus, you would never—"

"She asked me to. She was in a lot of pain, James, and there was no chance of her surviving, so she wanted it to be quick so she didn't have to suffer," Regulus explains, and the skin around James' eyes go tight. "I don't know if that was fair of her to ask of me, because I'm—I still feel guilty."

"You quite literally put her out of her misery, Regulus," James says softly, reaching out to cover Regulus' hand. He hooks his pinky through Regulus' and strokes the back of Regulus' thumb with his own. "It was a kindness. If it was you in her situation, wouldn't you be grateful?"

"Maybe," is all Regulus can say, because it's hard to see it that way when he still viscerally recalls the resistance of Irene's body when he slipped his dagger in between her ribs.

"And Mathias?" James asks.

Regulus presses his lips in a thin line. "Consumed by the need for revenge. They blamed Axus, no doubt, so as soon as they heard the cannon that meant Irene was gone, they went running after Axus to—well, I'm quite sure they planned to kill them. Axus snatched the bridge right out from under them while they were crossing it. I was too late to stop it."

"If I had been paying more attention, I could have stopped it," James announces, tipping his head back against the cave wall. The column of his throat rises and falls on a harsh swallow, and he closes his eyes. "I killed Hodge."

Regulus' first instinct is to deny it, because James wouldn't just murder a child, but then he remembers how he'd simply responded to Quinn attacking Evan. It was reflexive. He killed her without thinking. Bernice had been yelling for Hodge to kill Vanity, and if he actually did… Well.

"What happened?" Regulus asks quietly.

James' eyes flutter open. "He slit Vanity's throat. I was too late to stop it, too, but when I reached them… I didn't even mean to do it. Isn't that fucked up? Even though he just killed Vanity, I never intended for it to happen the way it did. I just—I pushed him. Shoved him away from her. We were so close to the river, right there by the water, and he…"

"He fell in," Regulus finishes.

"He was pushed in," James corrects. "By me."

"James," Regulus says gently, "it was an *accident.* You didn't intentionally kill him. You were trying to protect Vanity."

"Fat lot of good that did," James croaks with a bitter laugh, rolling his head forward. He winces when the movement leads to him jostling his leg a bit. "It's his birthday, you know."

"Hodge's?" Regulus asks. "Today?"

"Yeah." James nods. "Vanity told me. He would have been fifteen today, and because of me—"

"Don't do that. Stop it, James," Regulus whispers fervently, reaching out to grip his chin and turn his head. "The horrible reality is that it was a shit situation, and now he's dead. You didn't mean to do it. You're not—listen to me, you're not a bad person. You can't keep bad things from happening, and I'm sorry for that, but you said—you said once that we're here, and we're still trying, and that counts for a lot of things. It does. It still does."

James takes in a shaky breath, blinking hard, and he chokes out, "I don't know how I'm supposed to live with it."

"You just do," Regulus murmurs, because that's all he's got. He doesn't think there's some secret that makes things such as this any easier. It'll never get easier. You just learn how to keep going, despite how hard it is.

"A part of me doesn't want to," James confesses, and the words are softer than a breath, but they're as devastating as nuclear explosives locked on target. It leaves a wasteland behind inside Regulus.

Carefully, Regulus slips his hand from James' chin to his cheek, holding his gaze. His other hand is still under James', and he squeezes James' pinky with his own. Deadly serious, he looks James right in the eye and says, "Too bad."

"I—" James blinks, clearly startled out of his surge of emotion, because he obviously wasn't expecting that. He looks at Regulus for a beat, then huffs out a weak laugh. *"Too bad?"*

"Yes," Regulus says simply. "This isn't up for debate, James. I don't give a toss what some part of you may or may not want. I know this is all shit, but we *are* going home, even if I have to throw you over my shoulder and carry you there myself."

James' mouth twitches slightly. "Well, now I'll be very disappointed if you don't."

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Regulus muses lightly, practically goading James into flirting, at this point, because he's genuinely concerned about him. He can't believe he's thinking this, but he actually wishes James would be talking nonstop and flirting with him incessantly, compared to *this.*

"Yeah," is all James says, and he leaves it there. He teases no further, and he doesn't seem to have the energy or the inner joy to muster up a smile, or a wink, or a flirty comment.

Regulus' stomach churns, and he sits there in silence for a long time, not entirely sure what to say. He has no fucking clue how to be comforting, *especially* to James. It's not like he's *Sirius,* for fuck's sake. Literally, Regulus is the most awkward, stilted person on the planet when it comes to emotions of any kind, but particularly those of which he labels as vulnerable or uncomfortable.

It's strange how bad Regulus feels for that. He—well, it's not the first time in his life that he's put in a situation where he has to come to terms with the fact that he's not like most people. Usually, Regulus doesn't really care, but this time he wishes he knew how to be what he's never been, just so he could do something, *anything,* to help James right now.

In the end, Regulus can't figure out what to say, but if there's one thing he knows about James, it's that he's a very tactile person. Touch—he loves it, any kind, any place, any form. He's greedy for it, whether that's giving it to others or getting it; just a point of contact pleases him.

So, Regulus pulls away and, because it's getting darker, he grabs his blanket from his bag and stands up to step over James and settle on his other side. James blinks at him, clearly not understanding what the fuck he's doing, but he makes no complaints when Regulus carefully tucks the blanket under his bad leg, pulling it up over his arm. He then stands up and steps back over before settling in up against James as carefully as possible, trying not to jostle him too much.

"Sit up a bit," Regulus murmurs, and James does, though he still looks confused.

The expression of bewilderment melts into brief delight when Regulus slips his arm around him from where he leans up and gently pulls him back. James is essentially tucked up against his side, scooted down a little due to his leg, and he has the space to lean his head over on Regulus' shoulder. Regulus encourages him to do so wordlessly by raising the arm around him and sinking his fingers into James' hair, pushing his head over as he kneads at his scalp. James pretty much melts.

"Oh," James breathes out. "That's—that's really nice."

Regulus doesn't respond. He just uses his free hand to tug the blanket up over them both, tucking it in under him so they're as snug as they're going to get. He keeps running his fingers through James' hair and looks off to the side, like he can ignore what's happening if he's not looking. Not once has Regulus held James, not like this. He's allowed James to hold him, and that's it, because that's different somehow.

But, if this is all he can do, if this is all he can offer as a form of comfort, then do it he shall. He doesn't know what to say, but maybe he doesn't have to say anything at all.

It's clearly a comfort, because it doesn't take long for James to slump against him, falling asleep. He's still not doing well, so he's sweaty and shivery, but he seems to be in optimal positioning for the least amount of pain. Regulus takes it as a win and drags his hand from James' hair to gently brush his fingers over the side of James' neck instead, closing his eyes and leaning his cheek on top of James' head. He keeps caressing his skin, lulled into a sense of calm he hasn't felt in who knows how long at this point, and even though he's no doubt going to get a horrible crick in his neck and his arm will for sure fall asleep, he doesn't plan to move.

Regulus is going to stay just like this for as long as he can.

It makes something within him settle.

It gives him heart flutters.

He's not sure how long he sits there before he hears a light jingle like windchimes that makes his eyes snap open. Lifting his head, he follows the sound to watch a sponsor box float down at the entrance of the cave. Fucking *finally*.

Regulus exhales in relief as he carefully pulls his arm from around James, which causes him to grumble. He tries to cling tighter to Regulus, but eventually relinquishes his hold as he wakes up, mumbling questions and groaning in pain. Regulus mostly ignores him and tumbles out of the blanket, shivering in the cold but continuing on nonetheless.

It's too dark inside the cave to really see the contents, so Regulus crouches down and opens it right there at the mouth of the cave where there's at least light from the artificial moon and stars. He's fully expecting to find salve for James' leg.

He doesn't.

Regulus finds what he assumes will be the salve but is instead a canister of warm broth, which does admittedly smell so good that his mouth waters. There's one plastic spoon and a tiny box of matches. Regulus stares at it all, feeling oddly hollow. Like, okay, thanks, but that's not what they *need.* The most imperative thing is medicine to heal James, and there's no way Sirius doesn't know

that, so *what the fuck?*

Frustrated beyond measure now, Regulus pulls out the white card at the bottom and turns it towards the mouth of the cave, hunched over it and squinting to make out the words. There are only two. The card reads:

Thank him.

Regulus slowly lowers the card, keeping it face down, and he stares off into space while he tries to decode what the fuck that means. Thank him. Thank *who?* The only person Regulus is with right now is James.

Frowning, Regulus glances over at James, who's squinting one eye as he rubs the heel of his palm into the other one. He makes a groggy noise of confusion, clearly trying to wake up enough to ask what Sirius sent. Regulus just stares at him, trying to figure out what he's supposed to be thanking James for. What has James ever done for—

It hits him like a fucking train. The memory of Sirius grabbing him by his arm and telling him he should have been *thanking* James for making him desirable. A very recent memory, in fact, even though it feels like a lifetime ago. The day that James Potter announced to the whole world that he had feelings for Regulus Black, and the day the whole world decided they liked that.

Oh.

Ha. Well, fuck. For a moment, Regulus got so caught up in the fact that he and James would be able to go home that he forgot what made that possible in the first place. Their little love story. What everyone comes to see. Right. *That.*

Regulus abruptly realizes precisely why Sirius hasn't sent the medicine for James. He fucking *can't,* because everyone is chomping at the bits for a show. You don't get handouts in the arena; you have to earn every fucking thing you get, whether that's through the work your mentor puts in or through the performance you put on. Sirius has apparently done all that he can, and it's up to Regulus—and James—from here.

"Regulus?" James mumbles. "What does the card say?"

"Nothing for you," Regulus replies stiffly, crumbling the card in his fist and picking up the box before moving over to the place for the fire. He strikes a match and gets the fire going, where he immediately drops the card.

"He sent matches?" James asks, eyebrows furrowed, an orange glow dancing with shadows over his face.

"Yes, and also broth for us to share. It's warm," Regulus says, trying to soften his voice. He isn't sure if it works. Carefully, he lifts the blanket and sits underneath the edge of it, putting the broth in his lap.

James stares at it, seeming to come to terms with the fact that Sirius has not sent medicine. He swallows and gives Regulus a tight smile. "I'm not really hungry."

"I don't care. You're going to eat. You need it, and it'll warm you up," Regulus declares.

"But—"

"James, don't argue with me."

"Oh, fine," James grumbles, grimacing as he pushes himself up to sit up straighter. He starts to reach for the broth.

Regulus pulls it away and coughs, then meets James' gaze as he says, "No, let me do it."

James blinks, then raises both eyebrows. "Let you…feed me?"

"Yes," Regulus says, wanting to gouge his own eyeball out with the fucking spoon. His skin is crawling.

"Um, sure?" James' face twitches, visibly baffled, but he drops his hands and immediately starts fiddling with them. Regulus notices he does this when he's restless, nervous, or confused, or all three—and he especially does it when he's anxious.

Taking a deep breath, Regulus dips the spoon and scoots closer to carefully lift it to James' mouth. James' eyebrows are furrowed, but he dutifully sips it, eyeing Regulus over the top like he's finally lost it. Yeah, Regulus relates.

They're utterly silent as Regulus quite literally feeds James the broth and occasionally steals bites for himself in between. On the bright side, the broth warms him and sits well on his stomach, so that's nice. Everything else? Fucking awful.

This feels distinctly lacking in romance. Regulus is really, *really* bad at this. He doesn't know where to start, because he knows it's going to take something major to get James his medicine, and Regulus' mind is utterly blank. He could really use James' help right now, but bluntly asking him out loud to lean into a fake romantic moment sort of defeats the purpose. But maybe James can sort of…take the wheel on this one?

"I think we should talk about us," Regulus announces.

"Us," James repeats, blinking.

Regulus clears his throat. "Our relationship."

"Our—" James rears back a little. "Sorry, what? We have one of those?"

"Obviously," Regulus grinds out, agitated that James isn't immediately jumping on this opportunity as usual. Yes, he's been through a lot, but this is crucial. Regulus is going to need James to get it together. "Everyone has relationships, even if it's just two strangers. Being strangers defines the relationship between them. And the relationship between us is…"

James' eyebrows are throwing a fucking party at the top of his forehead. "It is…?"

"Complicated," Regulus settles on, finally.

"Yeah, that's a word for it," James mutters.

"Just—I think we should…talk about it," Regulus insists, struggling not to grimace. He would literally rather rip his fingernails off. "Because we're going home…"

"Oh!" James nods, like that makes sense. "Right, well, obviously we'll be working together to get home. You don't have to worry about that. I'll be with you the whole way."

Regulus nearly groans, but swallows it at the last moment. Oh, why is James doing this to him? "No, that's not what I meant. I know *that.* I'm talking about…us."

"Us," James repeats yet again, confused once more.

"You know, *feelings,"* Regulus clarifies. James stares at him like he's speaking an entirely different language. "Like—like how I had very big, very embarrassing feelings for you."

James' lips twitch. "You want to talk about that?"

I would rather die, but it's your life on the line, not mine, so here we are, Regulus thinks. He forces himself to mumble, "Well, we're sort of stuck here for the night, so why not?"

"I mean…if you want," James says slowly. "I already know about your feelings for me back then, though."

"Not really," Regulus tells him, taking a deep breath as he lifts up to feed James more broth. He buys time by taking a bite after, then drops his gaze to the spoon. "You only really know that it was from the age of ten to fifteen."

"Five years," James murmurs, sounding wistful. "Only half of how long I've had feelings for you. We're the definition of *right person, wrong time."*

Regulus glances up to find a sad smile on James' face, and it makes his heart flutter and clench at the same time. "You've had feelings for ten years? All of them?"

"It was always you," James says softly, his gaze meeting Regulus', warm with sincerity. "It's always going to be you."

"Right," Regulus croaks, looking away because he's not sure how to look at James when he's saying things like—that. He swallows. "Well, what you *don't* know is that I…"

"You…?" James prompts.

"I, um—I was—" Regulus takes a deep breath, then slowly lets it out and forces himself to make eye-contact. James is just watching him patiently, looking ridiculously fond. "I mean, I was a goner from the moment I saw you. Literally the first time I laid eyes on you, I—I was enamored, pretty much. I remember that, when Sirius dragged me outside to meet you, and I wasn't—at first, I wasn't looking forward to it at all—"

James frowns. "What? Why?"

"Because I didn't want Sirius to have a best friend. I was worried he'd—" Regulus cuts himself off and shakes his head, watching James' face soften. "But then, the door opened and there you were. I remember thinking even then, even at ten, that you had the prettiest eyes I'd ever seen. Behind your glasses and everything. Just like that, I was *very* happy that Sirius had made a best friend."

"You blushed the moment I smiled at you," James says, smiling affectionately now. Despite his injury and the pain he's surely still in, his eyes are sparkling. Huffing out a soft laugh, he whispers, "You were so *shy."*

"I couldn't help it," Regulus replies quietly.

"I know," James tells him, his voice gentle like he's trying to be kind to that small boy with helpless feelings now, as if he can make up for the fact that he wasn't then.

Regulus chokes out a harsh laugh and spoons out another bite for James, and then himself. "You also don't know that I used to collect brown rocks if they reminded me of your eyes. I would watch out my window every day after school to wait for you to come up the sidewalk so I could meet you at the door before Sirius did. I think I filled at least two journals about you before I even turned eleven. You don't even want to know how many I ended up burning at fifteen. I—James, I thought about you literally all the time. You were—I was—"

"Regulus," James says, and his eyes are so unbearably soft. So pretty, even to this day. "You said—you told me that what you liked about me, what you grew to hate, was that I made you feel, but

feel *what?* What comes after that?"

"Nothing," Regulus admits helplessly. "That's where it ended. You made me feel. You only had to be close to me, and I felt."

"Oh." James swallows. "I—oh."

"You weren't my first crush, James," Regulus whispers. "You were my first love."

James' eyes inexplicably fill with sadness, so much sorrow in his gaze that it's like he's mourning. "From love to hate. A great, big tragedy."

"James," Regulus rasps, his hands shaking so much that he has to sit the canister of broth aside.

"I wish I could be happy hearing that," James tells him, looking completely, utterly defeated. "How can I, though? You still hate me, don't you? Even now. Even after all this."

"I—James, I—" Regulus falters, because he knows what it will take. He knows what everyone wants to hear, but he can't say it, because he—because the words fail him, and he *can't.*

Regulus can't do this. Not here, not like this, maybe never. It's the equivalent of cracking open his chest and bearing his soul to the entire world, which is only slightly less terrifying than bearing it to James. Regulus can't do it, and he also can't afford to fail in getting James his medicine.

This whole time, Regulus has been steady on the fact that he wouldn't kiss James to save his own life, but he's apparently willing to do it to save James'.

That's exactly what he does. He can't speak, so he acts instead. Regulus doesn't realize he's going to do it until he's rocking forward on his knees and leaning in to press a closed-mouth kiss to James' lips. It's quick, over in a blink, almost awkward because James doesn't see it coming at all. It's barely a kiss, and Regulus knows as soon as he pulls back that it's not going to be enough. He desperately wishes it would be, because his heart is already slamming against his chest, just from that.

James stares at him with wide eyes, visibly startled, his mouth parted. He looks so, so confused—and it's wrong. It's *wrong* that Regulus is doing this to him. Regulus has no choice.

"Regulus?" James croaks, and there's so much hope in his voice that it's fucking heart wrenching.

"I want you to come home with me, James. I'll do *anything,"* Regulus whispers, leaning in again close enough that James can see his eyes and face in detail. He needs James to get it. He needs James to understand what's happening.

James' eyebrows furrow as he scans Regulus' face, and slowly, his gaze drops to the broth and then the fire. Regulus can pinpoint the exact moment that it clicks what's going on, because it's in that split second that Regulus can almost *hear* James' heart shatter. His eyes visibly dim, and for one second—only one—he looks absolutely *heartbroken.*

Regulus knows what it is to hate himself—he's done it for years—but he's never hated himself as much as he does at this moment, and the worst part is, it's not even his fault. It's not James' fault. None of this pain is something they have control over, all the way from death to a kiss. There was a time that Regulus would have liked nothing more than to break James' heart, just so he could know what it felt like, but that time has long since passed. Regulus wouldn't, if he didn't have to.

"Of course you will," James says, and his voice cracks, which Regulus feels directly in his chest. A soft, sad smile curls James' lips, and he nods. He understands. Just like that, Regulus knows that he understands. "We'll be home really soon, love. Together, we'll get there."

"I know," Regulus murmurs, reaching out to grab James' hand, squeezing it. He waits for James to squeeze back before leaning in to close the last bit of distance between their lips.

This time, Regulus kisses James like he means it. Like he can't help it. Like he's never wanted anything more. He lifts both hands and cradles James' face, curling forward into him to kiss him slow and sweet, savoring the way his lips part around a soft sigh. When Regulus feels the tear roll down James' cheek, hitting his finger, he gently brushes it away. It's their secret. No one will ever know but them.

It's devastating that a tear shed in heartbreak is the only thing that they get to have for themselves, but Regulus isn't sure what else he was expecting. This is what they are.

A great, big tragedy.

And, despite that, the kiss is so fucking good that Regulus' head spins in mere seconds, even before he dares to deepen it. But he does deepen it, slowly and tentatively, his heart crashing against his ribs like it's trying to take flight. Suddenly, Regulus *does* mean it. He *can't* help it. He *hasn't* wanted anything more than this. Oh, this.

James reaches up to grip the back of his neck, making a quiet, needy sound into Regulus' mouth, and Regulus is so desperate to taste it that he's shaking. The inside of James' mouth tastes like broth and warmth, but mostly him, and the slide of his tongue against Regulus' own draws a helpless, broken noise out of him. If Regulus knew at the age of fourteen that he would be doing this, he would have thought every moment of pain leading to this point was worth it. Regulus, at this age, is finding it difficult to disagree.

A hand Regulus has memorized slides up into his hair, and James is the one kissing him now, *really* kissing him. It doesn't matter where they are, what they've been through, or even the state of themselves at the moment. The arena could collapse down on them, and Regulus doubts he would care.

James pulls away just enough to suck in a sharp breath, and then he's chasing Regulus' mouth like a man possessed, one hand in his hair and the other gripping his side to pull him closer. Regulus is so agreeable to that, actually. He presses forward, wanting more, wanting all of it, anything. He feels —oh, he *feels*—

"Fuck," James hisses, ripping away to turn his head with a grimace, glaring down at his leg like he's debating cutting it off for daring to interrupt them.

Regulus splays his hand against the cave wall by James' head, tucking his face down against James' shoulder. He tries to discreetly catch his breath, unwilling to let anyone in the world see how much of a mess that just made him.

A beat passes. Two. Three. Regulus and James just breathe, not moving or speaking for a long time. Finally, once Regulus is mostly sure that he's gotten his shit together, he lifts his head and clears his throat. His voice is a little wooden, like he's reading lines from a script when he mutters, "Well, that was a bit stupid to do when you're hurt. We can't do that, or anything else, until you're healed, James."

"Yeah," James says softly, dropping his gaze. "That's for the best. But it was—" He hesitates, then lifts his eyes to look at Regulus, and Regulus knows this is real. Whatever he's about to say, he's going to mean it. "That was one of the happiest moments of my life, despite the pain."

I'm sorry, Regulus wants to say.

"That was the best kiss I've ever had," is what Regulus says instead, because if he can't apologize, he can at least tell the truth about that.

James' lips tug up into a crooked smile, and though it doesn't quite reach his eyes, it's real, too. "Good to know."

"We should finish the broth and sleep," Regulus whispers, and he reaches out to grab the canister to do just that. Feeding James isn't awkward or uncomfortable anymore.

For some reason, it's much more intimate now.

~•~

James' medicine comes only a bit after they've finished the broth, less than an hour later. He knows he should be happy about that, but it mostly just leaves a bitter taste in his mouth.

What it took to get it…

James doesn't even want to think about it. He never imagined a scenario in which he could get something he's wanted for so long without even coming *close* to actually having it at all. It's not Regulus' fault, James knows that, but it still fucking hurts.

Well, now James knows that Regulus would kiss him in the pursuit of saving his life, if there literally was no other option. How fucking romantic.

It's fucked up, mostly. James doesn't want to be resentful, but he can't help the anger and hurt that festers in him. He's in pain, he feels like death warmed over, and he's had the best kiss of his life from the man he wants so badly he can't move on, *but* only to save his life. He would have never, never gotten that kiss under any other circumstances, and knowing that stings. Their first kiss, and it's not even one he can be truly happy about. He almost wishes it didn't even happen.

Almost.

Regulus is more cheered by the medicine than James is, but it's hard for James to be happy when it feels like flames are licking up and down his leg.

Sirius has sent more of that magical salve that heals wounds at a rapid rate and also neutralizes infection; how well it will do when the injury is *this* bad, they don't know, but there's only one way to find out, right? It's not very much, just enough for James' leg, which makes sense because Regulus doesn't have any open wounds. He has a few bruises on his face and probably in other places James can't see, but that's it.

The card just says: *I'm sorry.* The sight of it makes a lump form in James' throat, and everything in him wants to reassure Sirius, but he finds that he can't. Right now, sorry doesn't feel good enough, and it's not even Sirius' fault in the first place. Regulus also doesn't respond to it; he just drops the card into the fire and looks away as it burns.

Regulus folds up the cloth and gives it to James for him to bite down on, which James does, and then he spreads the salve on the entry and exit point where the hook went into one side of his thigh and came all the way back out on the other. It's excruciating, quite frankly. James clamps down on the cloth and muffles his scream, pounding one fist to the cave floor like some other form of pain can distract him.

"I'm sorry. I know, I know, I'm sorry," Regulus chants in genuine distress, sounding strained and distracted. James knows, even in his agony, that Regulus is just rambling, which somehow makes it simultaneously so much better and so much worse when Regulus rasps, "It's okay. I promise it's okay. Almost done, baby. It'll be over soon. Shh, it's okay."

So, Regulus can't stop hating him, but he can call him *baby* and panic every time he's in high spikes of pain?

Lovely. Just fucking *lovely.*

Speaking of high spikes of pain, this one is so bad that James quite literally passes out. He doesn't know it's going to happen until the dark edges creep in, and then he's just relieved, because at least he doesn't have to feel this way anymore. He slips under while Regulus is still working on his leg.

James sleeps all the way through until morning, which he becomes aware of when he wakes up

again. The first thing he makes note of is that he and Regulus are snuggled up under the blanket just like they were before the broth came. Regulus is holding James, even in his sleep, his fingers slack in James' hair like he was stroking it before he drifted off.

The next thing James becomes aware of the distinct lack of pain in his leg. He holds his breath as he lifts his head and looks at it, heart thumping hard when he sees how much better it is. Each puncture wound is significantly smaller, and his leg is no longer swollen and inflamed. It's not completely healed, *but* he should be able to walk on it, and James himself is feeling much better as well.

James exhales and tips his head back, taking a moment to bask in it, feeling the ridiculous urge to laugh hysterically, though he refrains because Regulus is still asleep. Carefully, James turns his head and looks at him. Like this, Regulus' face is slack and innocent, unbearably sweet like the angel he can pretend to be but most certainly isn't.

Slowly, James lifts his hand and gently pushes some of Regulus' hair back from his face. It's a little limp and greasy from a week without showers, but James knows he's equally as filthy at the moment. They're both a mess of sweat, dirt, and dried blood. And yet, as always, Regulus is still beautiful.

For a moment, James feels like he's drowning in the realization that they're both alive and they *both* can make it home. It's almost too hard to believe, but James can feel the hope winding its way around his bones, refusing to let him go. They're so close. James can see his parents again. James can see Sirius again. They can do this.

The determination and pure *purpose* that grips James leaves him breathless. All the grief and pain has to wait until he gets home, because right now, James is fighting for more than just Regulus—for the first time, he grants himself the privilege of fighting for himself, too. Regulus is getting home no matter what it takes, but now James is lucky enough to join him.

"Regulus, come on, wake up," James murmurs, gently passing his fingers through Regulus' hair.

A quiet, unhappy noise leaves Regulus' mouth, and he presses closer to James. He's still asleep, clearly trying to cling to it *and* James at the same time. A soft exhale leaves him, and James' heart clenches violently when he realizes what Regulus is saying. Just the gentle, sleep-slurred sound of his name on Regulus' lips. It sounds so sweet James could cry.

Again, James cards his fingers through Regulus' hair and nudges him a little. Again, Regulus says, "James," and this time, he sounds slightly indignant as he snuggles closer.

"I know, love, I know," James mumbles, heaving a sigh as he leans his head forward to press his cheek to Regulus' shoulder. He's exhausted, too. He's so, so tired. He wants to go home.

James gives Regulus just a bit more time, closing his eyes and taking a quick break himself. Just breathing. Not thinking. It's one moment he steals for both of them, and then he opens his eyes and takes a deep breath, because they still have a ways to go. He starts prodding Regulus awake more insistently.

When Regulus finally does wake up, he's grumpy in that way James can't help but be fond of. The affection he feels for Regulus is enough to strangle him, and after their kiss, the sensation just hurts. He finds it hard to look at Regulus, but really, that's all he wants to do.

Nonetheless, they have to get started. They can't stay here for much longer, because Bernice and Axus are no doubt out on the prowl, practically *tasting* victory at this point, much the same way James and Regulus are. Regulus is pleased to see that James can stand and walk, at least, though there is a little pain—nothing compared to what it was before, so James can absolutely tolerate it without complaint.

Regulus once again removes his coat briefly to cut off another section all the way around his shirt, bringing it a little above his belly-button and showing off how slim his waist is. The sight of it and the small of his back makes James' mouth go dry; he can't stop himself from looking, and when Regulus catches him doing it, he doesn't say a word. He just puts his coat back on—but doesn't zip it—and kneels down in front of James to wrap his leg again. It's as healed as it's going to get for now, but wrapping it keeps it from being exposed to anything as they move through the woods.

They don't speak much as they prepare to leave, and James wishes with everything in him that there wasn't this stifling tension between them. It puts him on edge. He doesn't *want* to feel angry, or upset, but he can't help it.

However, they can't just—set out with no plan, so they do eventually start talking about what comes next. It's somehow easier to talk about their next moves and their survival than anything else, so that's what they do. It's day seven, and only three people stand between them and getting home, so what exactly is their plan? Well, they barely get five minutes into the discussion before they're bickering.

"No," James snaps. "I don't believe that."

"James," Regulus grits out, "I know he's your ally—"

"Peter is my *friend,"* James cuts in harshly. "He's my friend, Regulus. I promise you, he's not going to fucking team up with Bernice, alright? He wouldn't do that."

"Why?" Regulus challenges, stopping at the mouth of the cave to glare at him, his jaw set. "The chance to go home, to work with someone to get home—that's too good of an opportunity to pass up, James. If they're working together—"

"They're *not,"* James argues. "Peter isn't a fucking death eater."

"So, where is he?" Regulus demands.

James clenches his jaw. "I don't know, but he's not with her. She wants us dead, and so does Axus. Peter wouldn't betray me like that."

"If he's prioritizing his survival, he might," Regulus counters, frowning at him. "Riddle me this, James. What happens when we come across him if he's *not* a death eater, hm?"

To that, James has no answer.

"He stands between us and home, too," Regulus reminds him, holding his gaze. "Say he is alone and wants to help us handle Bernice and Axus, *then what?"*

"I'm getting really tired of you asking me that," James grits out. "I don't fucking know, alright?! I don't know!"

"James," Regulus says, his voice softening, "you have to—"

"Shut up!" James bursts out. "For fuck's sake, just *shut up."*

Regulus jerks back a little bit, his mouth snapping shut so hard that his teeth clack together. He stares at James, and James stares back, breathing hard. He's so angry. So furious and frustrated

about so many things.

James waits for the regret he knows he should feel, but it never comes. He's not sorry. He doesn't want to apologize or take it back. He *wants* Regulus to shut up, to stop shoving it in James' face how fucking awful everything is all the damn time. It's silent between them, and James is too angry to care.

Regulus drops his gaze and looks away, then starts walking out of the cave without another word. James follows, his hatchet in hand. Regulus brought it to him, and he holds it now, fingers gripping the handle tight.

Neither of them speak or look at one another as Regulus leads them to a stream so they can refill their water. James keeps waiting to feel bad for hurting Regulus' feelings, because he knows that he did; he saw it in Regulus' eyes the moment it happened. James keeps waiting, and the remorse never rises within him. Even when his anger simmers, he's not guilty.

At the stream, they both take the time to actually wet their hair and have bird-baths, using the cloth to wipe away dirt and grime that's been building for days. It's not even close to a shower, but James does admittedly feel better just to be even slightly more clean than before. He's even treated to the sight of Regulus' waist and hips gleaming in the sunlight with water droplets, and it's ridiculous how he wants to walk over and just fucking *bite.* Not a playful bite, no, James wants to sink his teeth into Regulus and leave the deep imprints of his teeth from one jutting hip bone to the other.

In the end, James has to look away to fight the impulse.

They leave the stream more hydrated and mildly cleaner, but no less tense. Still, even now, they're not speaking. James can see that Regulus is peeking over at him cautiously every few minutes, but he keeps walking and staring straight ahead.

James doesn't know where they're going. They never got past the discussion on Peter, so he's just walking in the same direction as Regulus. At this point, he refuses to even ask.

His leg still hurts, and the background pain slowly makes itself more known the longer he walks on it. Rather against his will, James slows a little bit. Regulus matches his pace immediately, not saying a word. The silence is so loud, and usually, James would absolutely hate it—but still, he's too angry to care.

They've only been walking for a little over an hour when James has no choice but to take a break. He's started limping, and he needs to rest for a moment, so he goes over to lean against a tree. He doesn't explain himself to Regulus, doesn't even call out to him, but Regulus stops the instant he does anyway.

"Your leg?" Regulus asks quietly, finally breaking the silence.

James just grunts an affirmative.

Regulus swallows, then turns away and walks off in between the trees. James watches him go, not even speaking when he loses sight of him. It takes a few beats of silence and the echo of Regulus' presence that he left behind, and then James feels the unease set in along with his weariness, agitation, and pain.

James doesn't like not being able to see Regulus. It makes a knot of stress form at the top of his spine; it puts him on edge. Make no mistake, James is still angry for some fucking reason he can't really figure out—perhaps angry at everything—but that doesn't mean he wants Regulus to leave.

As much as he needs this break, James starts to push himself back up to follow Regulus wherever he's gone, because that's him, isn't it? That's what he always does. It's pathetic. Yet, he can't stop himself, so that's exactly what he begins to do, only to stop when Regulus comes back into view again.

Regulus has a large stick, longer than it is wide, and he brings it right to James. He holds it out and mumbles, "For you to take some of your weight off your leg."

James doesn't say anything as he reaches out and takes it. He just looks away and rests against the tree. The pain in his leg is dulling slowly but surely.

"James," Regulus says softly, and he's not quite able to meet James' eyes when he looks at him. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," James replies shortly, his tone making it very clear that it's *not* fine, though he honestly doesn't know what it is he's actually upset about.

"Right," Regulus whispers. "Okay. Sorry."

They fall silent again, not looking at each other, and then they start walking a few minutes later when James thinks he's ready. The stick helps a lot, so much so that James almost wants to thank Regulus for the idea, but the words are blocked by the thick knot of frustration in his throat.

Another hour passes in suffocating silence.

"Alright?" Regulus asks, eventually. "Your leg, I mean."

"Fine," is James' clipped response.

Regulus comes to an abrupt halt, making James walk past him. James doesn't stop or look back, just keeps right on going, and then Regulus rasps, *"James."*

At that, the way Regulus says his name, James stops. He sounds so upset. Genuinely hurt. Maybe even a bit scared. Despite everything, hearing Regulus sound like that tugs on something deep in James, like it hooks right into his soul and drags him out of his own feelings. Slowly, he turns around.

For a moment, James is gripped with such blind fury and bubbling resentment that he almost can't breathe from it, and he can't figure out the source. It's all of it, he thinks. It's coming from all different directions, everything building up too high and starting to tip over. It's the loss, it's this arena, it's the memory of a kiss that wasn't real.

And how *dare* Regulus look at him like that? Like he's hurt, too. Like James' sharp edges are cutting into him, as if he's not made of stone. Like he's more afraid of James' anger than he is when someone is threatening his life.

"You know, you can't handle even a tiny portion of what you give," James tells him, his voice sharp.

"I know," Regulus murmurs, his shoulders slumping. "I'm aware that it's a flaw."

"So, how does it feel?" James challenges. "Hm? Does it feel good, Regulus?"

"No," Regulus says softly, "it doesn't."

James nods sharply. "Maybe think about that next time you forget to care about other people's feelings. I have them, you know. Has it ever crossed your mind that I'm struggling, too? Don't you think this is getting to me as well? All of it? I *hate* it, Regulus. I—" His swallows, his chest tight as the tangle of emotions inside clump together within him and bang around against the hollow of his ribs. "I need something good, and I can't find it. You won't even help me look."

"James," Regulus croaks, his face sagging with regret.

"I *need* to believe in something good," James chokes out, desperate for Regulus to understand. "Peter can't be a death eater, because I—I need him not to be. Why would you try to take that away from me?"

Regulus curls his arms around his stomach, hands coming up to grip the sleeves of his coat, fingers holding the fabric tight, twisting it. "I just—I wanted you to be prepared. I don't want you to get hurt, James."

"It's too fucking late for that!" James explodes. "Don't you get it? You can't protect me from this, because I'm already here! I'm right fucking here; I'm in this with you, and you can't just expect me to be what you need me to be for your own comfort, then turn around and tear me down when I'm doing everything I can not to lose myself!"

"I'm—I swear I'm not trying to tear you down," Regulus starts, but James cuts him off.

"You treat me like I'm stupid for daring to see good in people, but if there's no good in anyone, then what's the fucking *point?"* James snaps. "I don't know about you, but I have to believe that there's good in this world, or otherwise what are we even fighting for? What's the point in living if we're not letting ourselves have reasons to? Not everyone in this world will let us down, and I'm not a fool for expecting the best out of someone, because we're all here, and we're all trying, and that *has* to mean something. I *need* it to mean something."

"Okay, James," Regulus whispers. He swallows thickly and nods, a deep sorrow in his eyes. "Okay."

James scoffs. "You don't agree."

"I'm sorry," Regulus rasps. "I wish I could."

"Why don't you?" James asks, frustrated. "I don't understand. At least I'm trying. You don't—you won't even try, do you know that? Why not?"

"The only good in this world I've ever known was you and Sirius," Regulus confesses, "and you both let me down."

"Fuck you, Regulus," James hisses, his hands shaking as anger surges within him. "Even then, even at fifteen years old, I was just like this. Trying, and trying, and trying. I really fucking tried, but you made that difficult. But did it ever, even *once,* cross your mind that maybe—" His breath hitches, and his throat feels swollen all of a sudden. "Maybe I needed—"

"James," Regulus says.

"Maybe I needed someone to care, too," James croaks. "Did that ever occur to you? I mean, I—I got it, you know? I really did understand that things were hard for you, but it was like… I don't know. It was like you forgot that, in all of that, you weren't the only one who lost something. I was fifteen, Regulus. Fifteen years old and trying as hard as I could, and you pushed me away."

Regulus looks away. "I know. I—wanted to."

"You wanted to," James repeats, his voice hollow.

"I think I forgot how to let anyone be close," Regulus says. "Maybe that makes me selfish, maybe that makes me cruel—"

"No, that's—I'm not—" James takes a deep, steadying breath as he shakes his head. "You were fifteen, too. Only just. We were *children,* Reg. Neither of us knew what we we're doing, and to be honest with you, I can't say we know now. But I'm not blaming you, alright? I'm not—I don't blame any of us. None of it was our fault. Not mine, yours, or Sirius'."

"And yet, you're angry with me for it," Regulus murmurs.

James clenches his jaw, then stiffly says, "Yes, I am. I wasn't just trying because that's who I am, Regulus. I was trying because I needed you. I needed you, and you didn't care. So, yes, I'm angry. I'm angry, because sometimes it feels like all I do is try, only to fail every time, and I don't know how to give up, so I'm just stuck in this same fucking cycle with no way out. And here we are—I'm still trying, I still won't give up, and it infuriates me that I still need you, and you still don't care."

"That's not fair," Regulus says quietly. "I can't give you what you need if you won't at least tell me what it is. You didn't then either, James, do you know that? You tried so hard, tried to do something when there was nothing you *could* do, and you just wouldn't *quit,* even when I told you over and over I didn't need or want you to take care of me. But you never once said you needed me, not until now."

"I didn't know how to say it," James admits hoarsely. "I didn't even know until it was too late. Isn't that fucked up? I wasn't even *aware* that I was hurting, because I was fucking busy trying to ignore it because it—it was easier to focus on your pain than let myself feel my own. I'm—I take care of everyone else because it makes me feel good, but it's also so that I don't have to face that sometimes I need to be taken care of, too."

The skin around Regulus' eyes are tight, and James can see his own regrets reflected in Regulus' gaze. So much history, so much pain between them, and maybe that's all they know. Maybe that's how they've survived this long in the arena. This isn't new. They've been suffering for years now.

"What do you need from me?" Regulus asks.

"You, mostly," James says with a bitter laugh, because he knows he won't be getting that, not really. "But I'll settle for you letting me keep trying. I don't want to prepare for the worst, but hope for the best; I want to believe that there's good in this world and the people in it, even if you don't agree."

Regulus takes a deep breath, then nods. "Alright."

"Alright," James rasps, the knot unfurling in his chest as he exhales shakily. "I just—I need this, Regulus. I really do. I have to believe there's still a point, because I—I can't—"

"There is," Regulus cuts in. "There's always a point, James, and wherever you find it—well, it doesn't matter who agrees or doesn't. We all have the things that keep us going. Yours is beautiful,

you know. It's really beautiful."

James feels himself deflate as his eyes prick with tears. "Is it?"

"Yes," Regulus murmurs.

"What's yours?" James mumbles.

Regulus sighs, giving him a resigned smile. "Pure spite, mostly, but also… Fear. Fear keeps me going, because I'm afraid of what happens if I stop. I don't know if that makes me a coward, but I do know that your determination to keep going because you refuse to give up or stop trying… Well, it's not stupid, not at all. You're brave, James. Beautifully brave."

James feels like that cracks him open a bit. It hits him then how frightened he is, how desperately he needs his hope and his persistence in always trying, no matter his failures, because he's going to live. Because he can go home, and that means he has to live with what he's gone through.

And that's why he's so angry. He's upset because he won't get to just—escape the horrors of what's happened here, and he has to bear the weight of it after bearing so much already. It's infuriating. It's devastating.

But this—what Regulus has said to him—eases that fury, that fear, that failure. It crawls up from something innocent and soft in his center, in his very soul, and curls up around his heart, warm and snug. It makes him feel like he's going to be okay. It makes him feel safe.

"Thank you," James breathes out.

"We should go," Regulus says softly, turning to walk again, but he abruptly stops and looks back. "And James?"

"Yeah?" James whispers.

"If there's one thing all of this has taught me," Regulus tells him, "it's that I've always cared."

James sucks in a sharp breath, holding it as a balloon expands in his chest, his heart starting back to life with a harsh kick. He looks into Regulus' eyes, those eyes that he knows so well, and it's true. Regulus is telling the truth. That's real.

He's always cared.

Oh.

James breaks out into a helpless smile, feeling more like himself than ever, and Regulus' lips curl up at the sight before he turns and walks away.

Feeling much better, James happily follows.

Chapter End Notes

everyone: WHEN WILL THEY KISS???
me: be careful what you wish for

so, that one was kinda heavy/angsty, huh? let's get into it, i guess.

it was really important to me to show that regulus was trying to comfort james and be there for him out of care (*cough* and repressed love *cough*) even before he was reminded of the love story the hallows are expecting from him. it was also really important for me to show just how much he struggles with that, because it doesn't come easily to him. it's not something that he knows how to do naturally, but the fact that he makes the effort for james is so, so important, and it is, in fact, a love language, honestly.

him being Completely Clueless about how to be romantic 😭😭😭 like poor babe, why did it have to fall on him? james would have THRIVED in that role, it would have been his time to shine lmaoooo

but no, it was on regulus to lead the charge, as it were, and he ended up panicking and kissing his not-boyfriend. great job, reg, you're doing amazing sweetie (oh and honorable mention to regulus accidentally calling james "baby" again!!! the next time he does it, it's on purpose!!!)

i want all of you who were grinning, cheering, kicking your feet, and squealing to know that the hallows were doing the exact same things no, you're no better than a hallow. it's okay, im no better than a gamemaker for essentially Making It Happen. yes, im becoming self-aware.

i make jokes, but really, that whole "performance" was so sad ☹☹☹ like it wasn't james or regulus' fault, or even sirius', for that matter. im really putting james through the wringer in this one, aren't i? he's gotten caught in a bear trap, lost all of his allies/friends in one go, had a hook buried in his thigh, got dragged through the woods, suffered the pain of that and his grief, and THEN the man he's in love with kissed him out of necessity and for no other reason. like. the poor man can't catch a break 😔

which is why he was so pissed off. it was about time he snapped. like, he's been going THROUGH IT, so of course he finally reached the end of his unbelievably long rope. he had ENOUGH. hurt regulus' feelings though 😭😭😭 no, because regulus is a big baby when james gets mad at him. he's like: I Don't Like This Please Stop Please Don't Be Mean To Me. as much as i love regulus, he's absolutely the person who can dish it out but Cannot Take It. james snaps at him ONCE and he's like: wait no love me again pls

james insisting that peter can't be a death eater and won't betray him; please know that this comes from a place of him literally just trying to cling to Something Good. like, he needs that, because he is who he is. it's not necessarily because he actually believes it, he just really, really fucking hopes. and he's so valid, actually, for how he tries to find purpose and meaning. it's not weak to hope, to believe that there is good in this world. i actually think that's really strong, and brave.

regulus is a bit too jaded for that, though, and he's just a different type of person, which is okay. he's right to say that however someone finds a point to things is okay, and it doesn't matter who agrees or doesn't, because we all need that, ya know?

this got unexpectedly deep for a hunger games au fanfic... ANYWAY, the real main character of this chapter!!! regulus admitting that he's always cared about james. GOODBYE. the way that literally jolted james back to life 😭😭😭 they're so in love...

next chapter is a Big One. very, very close to the end. so, you know, prepare for that!

let me do numbers i guess.

tributes remaining: 5
regulus
james
axus
bernice
peter

UPDATING ON SATURDAY

Hesitation

Chapter Notes

hello, all!

warnings for this chapter:

-references to past death
-references to past child death
-depictions of a nightmare and a panicked/defensive response to it
-graphic depictions of violence
-mentions of blood
-murder/death
-angst

(i will be putting a more in-depth warning in the end notes, as i always tend to on the heavier chapters, so don't hesitate to check if you need to!!!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Er, where exactly are we going?" James finally gets around to asking, after they've been walking for ages, at this point. The mood has settled between them, so they've had a few light discussions about meaningless things, especially while James is taking his much-needed breaks.

"The crimson river. If the others aren't already there, then they'll end up there at some point to look for supplies they won't find. Also, if we can beat them there, it's a good place to be, because it's surrounded by open space, so we'll see them coming when they do," Regulus explains.

"Why won't they find supplies?"

"I threw them away. All of them."

"So, wait, why did you throw away all the supplies?" James asks in confusion, not quite grasping the point of that.

Regulus' face does this odd twitching thing. "Well, I was stuck, and frustrated, so I…"

"Had a tantrum?" James says, amused by the thought.

"Something like that," Regulus mutters. "In any case, it was for the best. It ensures that the others can't use it, at the very least. Peter doesn't have weapons or supplies. Axus only has their hook, and Bernice has her sword, and that's it. They can survive out there, sure, but they're going to want the ease of supplies eventually. It'll draw them in, if it hasn't already."

James hums thoughtfully. "And what are we going to do if we get there and find Bernice and Axus already waiting?"

"They are going to try to kill us, and instead, we will kill them," Regulus responds without missing a beat.

"Just like that, huh?" James murmurs.

"I don't like it any more than you do, James," Regulus replies quietly, swiveling his dagger between his fingers, lips tipped down at the corners.

"I'm tired of all the death," James admits, looking down at his hatchet, not entirely sure when he became so familiar with it that his hand sometimes feels wrong without the weight of it.

Regulus takes a deep breath. "I know, me too, but it'll all be over soon. Maybe as soon as tonight. We could—James, we could be home by tomorrow. That's what we need to focus on."

"And then what?" James asks, admittedly smug that he gets to turn Regulus' words back on him.

"What?" Regulus blurts out, glancing over at him. As soon as their eyes meet, his face turns bright red. He looks away quickly, clearing his throat. "Sorry, what? I mean—what? What do you mean *and then what?"*

James' eyebrows shoot up in surprise, because Regulus is blatantly flustered at the moment—from the question, maybe? James isn't sure. "I meant what I said. We get home, yeah? And then what? What's next, Reg?"

"Oh. Well, first on my list, I want a long, hot shower," Regulus says, sounding wistful.

"That sounds really good, yeah," James admits, because it does. His lips curl up. "You know, in the interest of conserving water, we could have a long, hot shower *together."*

"Do I look like I care about conserving water, James?"

"Alright, fair enough, but you should care. Water is a limited resource, so it's important not to waste it."

Regulus shoots him a *look.* "Oh, yes, *that's* the reason you're interested in taking a shower with me. No other reason at all."

"Of course," James says with an innocent smile, because he's in a much better mood now after their earlier talk, after letting out some of his frustration. He'd forgotten how good it feels just to be—happy.

"I'd also like to sleep for, like, three days *at least,"* Regulus declares, sounding genuinely serious.

James snorts. "Oh, yeah, that's high on my list, too."

"You're not going to suggest we sleep together in the name of sharing body heat, or…something?" Regulus asks.

"Actually, no," James says with a chuckle. "Don't take this the wrong way, but if there's anyone I'm sleeping with when I get back, it's absolutely Sirius."

"You two are so codependent that it's borderline worrisome," Regulus muses. "Do you *ever* get tired of each other?"

"Literally never," James admits.

"That's impossible," Regulus mutters.

"I know it's hard for you to grasp, Reg, but sometimes people actually just *like* other people," James teases. For some reason, this makes Regulus flinch a little bit, and James' smile fades. "What? What is it? What did I say?"

Regulus clears his throat. "Not you. It's just—it's something Evan said before he—before he died, is all."

"Oh," James says softly, immediately solemn. Carefully, he sways closer to Regulus to bump their arms together. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," Regulus replies.

James wants so badly to comfort him, but he knows now what he didn't at fifteen—pushing too hard with Regulus won't get him anywhere. So, he just says, "Okay."

Some of the tension leaves Regulus' shoulders, and they fall silent. It's a comfortable silence, though, both of them just left to their own thoughts. Just existing in each other's spaces.

They keep walking, taking a break nearly every hour because of James' leg, and the sun is starting to set. They gather berries and eat them; they stay hydrated and refill their water when they come across a stream; they keep going.

It takes all day to make it to the field twenty-four people started in a week ago, with only five remaining now. James' leg is mostly to blame for the length of the trip, because even though he can walk on it, he can only really go at a slower pace and there *is* still some pain, so the breaks are necessary. Regulus doesn't complain, for which James is grateful.

But, eventually, they do break through the treeline, the crimson river and the cave it surrounds coming into view. They stop on the edge of the forest, and they stare at it in complete silence, neither of them saying a word.

It's completely deserted.

~•~

Regulus and James have to wait a bit for the crimson river to ice over before they can cross it; his unease does admittedly rise even more when they bypass the scattered poles to step into the cave. It's empty in an eerie, cavernous way that screams of gutted, hollow things, a reflection of what last took place here. Regulus' skin crawls.

"You really cleaned this place out," James mumbles, looking around at—nothing, because Regulus quite literally dumped every single thing other than the tables and racks.

"Yes," is all Regulus can bring himself to say, taking his bag off and plopping gracelessly down on the floor with a sigh.

He's tired. Today has been especially taxing. Nothing even really *happened;* it's just how emotionally draining it was to have James actually, legitimately angry with him. Properly furious, and not just bickering or mild frustration. James has never before gotten angry with him—with everything all at once—like that. Regulus has decided he would like to never go through that again, because it had…

Well, honestly, it had actually really hurt his feelings, which was startling. He learned *very* quickly that he genuinely does care about how James feels towards him. It's a bit alarming, but Regulus does *not* like James being upset with him.

Regulus thinks he's handling this whole *'caring about James Potter'* business really well, actually. He sort of knew, seeing as it's fairly obvious by this point, but he was *clinging* to the exact opposite before the announcement. He doesn't have to cling anymore, because now he *and* James can go home, both of them, so what's the harm in *letting* himself care? It's not the worst thing that's ever happened to him, like it would be if James *couldn't* come home with him.

So, sure, Regulus cares about James. Regulus cares about whether or not James is upset with him. Regulus cares about James' happiness and sense of purpose. That's fine. Regulus can handle this. Definitely. It's all under control.

At the moment, James looks as weary as Regulus feels about being back here. Neither of them have good memories here, and this is where nearly all of James' friends died. He hadn't been able to look in the direction where he cradled Vanity's body in his arms, and he hadn't been able to look down at the river when they were crossing the ice. Regulus hadn't been able to look away from the pale hands, and then he couldn't rip his gaze away from the pole Irene died against.

"What do we do if the others don't come?" James murmurs as he joins Regulus in sitting on the ground, groaning in relief as he takes his weight off his leg.

"If they don't…" Regulus presses his lips into a thin line and moves over to sit by James' leg, reaching out to untie the strip of shirt he put around the wound. "Well, one way or another, we'll all find each other at some point. The gamemakers will ensure that. It's best for your leg if we stay here anyway. Maybe they'll just…deal with each other so we don't have to."

"If I had to guess, Peter is probably back in the cave where we all were together," James says, his eyebrows furrowed. "It's a good place to hide from Bernice and Axus. I hope he's safe."

Regulus doesn't point out how contradicting that hope is; he leaves James to his heart wrenching kindness. Deep down, Regulus knows it's only going to end badly. He's quite sure that Peter is with Bernice, at the very least, and the thing is… Regulus can't even blame him, if he is. This is about survival, and if Peter has turned to the death eaters to make it out alive, then… Well, truthfully, not everyone is like James.

Not everyone puts their morals and what they believe is right over their survival. Regulus doesn't. Regulus *wouldn't.* If it was him, if it came down to survival, he would be a death eater, too. Fear and survival are strong motivators, and when they just so happen to intersect, it can lead to horrible choices. Regulus doesn't know if that makes him a bad person.

He thinks the arena makes everyone a bad person while they're here. The only exception to the rule is James. He's the only person who could drag himself through all of this filth and cruelty and still hold onto his shine.

Regulus hopes James never loses his shine.

"Well, it doesn't look worse," James says quietly when Regulus reveals his leg and they're both just staring at it.

He's right, it *doesn't* look worse. It also doesn't look better. The open punctures are still there, and though they're not bleeding or inflamed, they also haven't scabbed over. It looks like it's in a stasis, frankly. Like it would finish healing if they had a bit more salve, only a bit more, and then the wounds would close.

Regulus doesn't know if Sirius will be able to send more, and he really doesn't think James wants a repeat performance of the previous night. Regulus isn't even sure if he can do it, not again, not when it hurt James so much.

Another thing Regulus has learned, he absolutely *despises* it when James is in pain of any kind.

"It should be fine until we make it out of here. They'll be able to heal you up, no doubt," Regulus declares, folding up the strip of the shirt to the clean side and rewrapping the injury.

"It'll be an interesting scar, at least," James muses, and when Regulus shoots him a look, he snorts weakly. "What? Scars are sexy. Aren't I just so sexy, love? Tell me how sexy I am."

Regulus rolls his eyes, but his lips twitch, because honestly? He's so grateful James seems a bit better—not fully alright, but trying to be. "You are unfortunately…not horrible to look at. Does that suffice?"

"I'll take it," James announces decisively, clearly pleased. "I do recall you telling me that I'm… what was it? *Unholy."*

"The devil," Regulus says dryly.

James grins at him. "Well, you know what they say. The devil doesn't come to you with horns and a pitchfork, but rather in the form of everything you want. So, if that's what I am to you, I am *not* complaining."

"I take it back immediately," Regulus tells him.

"Too late," James teases. He leans forward slightly, his eyes sparkling. "Do I tempt you, Regulus?"

"To kill you? Absolutely," Regulus shoots back.

"Well, we both know that's a lie," James says, waving a hand lazily as he leans back. He tilts his head slightly, looking curious. "I feel like I can ask now, since we can both go home, but…would you really have killed me, if it came to it?"

Regulus says what he always says, what he's been saying from the beginning, and it's much easier to say now that he knows he won't have to put it to the test. "Without hesitation."

James just smiles.

~•~

They settle in for the night with the usual routine. Water, blanket, very small fire (both to avoid detection and also because they didn't find much in the way of supplies for a fire around the cave), and what James has come to associate as a treat in the form of their bodies pressed close.

Regulus isn't holding him tonight, going back to being the little spoon again. James lays on his side —not on his bad leg, of course—and drapes his arm over Regulus' waist under the blanket, feeling his (warm) bare skin against his own.

"Reg?" James murmurs to the back of his head, listening to the distant sound of creaking trees and whistling wind, almost drowned out by the closer sound of the crackling fire.

"Hm?" Regulus replies.

"You know that other life?" James asks quietly. "The one where we could have been happy together? Where we're not a great, big tragedy?"

Regulus is silent for a long beat, then he says, "Yes."

"Tell me something about it," James whispers. "It can be anything. Anything at all. Just… Will you __"

"We have a bookshelf," Regulus cuts in, sounding absolutely certain, and James closes his eyes. "Sirius built us a bookshelf, and you have the top shelves because you're taller, and I have the lower shelves because I keep all my journals on the very bottom. You never read them because I don't want you to, and you respect that, but you replace the flowers between the pages when they crumble, even when I don't ask you to."

"You'd never have to ask," James murmurs. "I'd just do it."

"I know," Regulus says softly.

James dips his head forward and presses his face to the back of Regulus' neck. "What else?"

"I write little notes and sneak them in your pocket when you're going somewhere, to work or just into the market or even to visit friends, and you find them later. It's not—well, it's short and usually just things I can't bring myself to say out loud. Sometimes it's reminders for something you need to do, because you'd probably forget otherwise," Regulus tells him.

"I'd keep them. All of them. Every single one, even just the reminders," James says, a lump in his throat.

"I profusely deny that I write them, even though I sign them all the same way—R.A.B.—and you just laugh and say you must have a secret admirer."

"You would absolutely do that."

Regulus hums, his fingers moving gently over the back of James' hand under the blanket, tracing the tendons and the hills of his knuckles. "Yes, I would."

"What else?" James prompts again.

"It's a modest life. Comforting in its simplicity. Mundane, almost, but never completely. Quiet and safe. Our home is warm and never absolutely spotless, showing signs of life, breathable because we exist there without worrying if we're doing it too loudly or not. We don't mute ourselves, and we laugh. Every day, we laugh," Regulus rasps. His voice is small and tight, strained like he's feeling too much. "Sometimes, before bed, you force me to my feet and pull me in, even when I complain. We dance by the firelight."

"You'd let me do that?" James asks, his heart clenching with how deeply the yearning hooks into him.

"In that life, I do," Regulus whispers. "I let you do whatever you want, and when you want to dance, we dance."

"Slow-dancing?" James checks, trying to imagine it, picturing their bodies flush together as they go in circles and press playful smiles to each other's cheeks; whispering in Regulus' ear, close and intimate; simply content with one another.

"Slow and swaying. Just holding on because we can, because there's some other life out there where we can't, where we don't, where we're a great, big tragedy—and we're so thankful it's not that one," Regulus croaks.

Because it's this one, James doesn't say, because he knows that to say it out loud would only put them in danger, but he's aware that it's true, more than anything else here.

It doesn't matter if they're going home. James is aware that what has happened here in the arena doesn't extend out to who they are when they get back. He would never expect anything out of Regulus because of what's taken place here, and Regulus has made his feelings very clear. He can care about James, and he can fight with everything in him to get James home, but that doesn't mean their love story is real.

James would like to try. Of course he would. He's all about trying, and maybe they could find solace and comfort with each other after this. It's one of those things that could bring them closer together or rip them further apart, and James won't know either way until they're no longer under the microscopic pressure of the demands they have to meet in order to survive. It can't be real, not here.

But maybe it could be real at home. Maybe, with time, if they actually tried, if they took it slow and turned *what could have been* into *what could still be,* then maybe—just maybe—they could have something real. James would treat Regulus right. He would be so good to him, given the chance.

Regulus said James was his first love, didn't he?

James would give anything to be his last.

~•~

Of course he's in the tree. Fuck, Regulus hates the trees. How he ended up here, he doesn't know, but for fuck's sake, let him *down.* He hates being up so high; he can't even see the ground. This is bullshit, because the trees—oh, how he *hates* trees—

"Why the long face, lover boy?"

"Why do you *think,* Evan?" Regulus snaps, lifting his head to glare at Evan, who sits further down the branch and swings his legs with a grin. "Because I'm in a fucking tree, I can't even see the ground, and *some* of us aren't lunatics like you, so we're not exactly happy about situations such as these."

"Ah, poor lamb," Evan says, clicking his tongue, though humor dances in his eyes. "Unfortunately, there's nowhere to go but up. Go on, keep climbing. Almost there."

"Where?" Regulus asks, tilting his head up and freezing as soon as he sees James and Sirius sitting on a branch so high they're basically perched on a cloud. They're laughing as they talk to each other and swing their legs, focused entirely on one another without bothering to glance down. When he calls out to them, they don't acknowledge him at all.

"Almost there, Regulus," Evan tells him.

"I can't reach them," Regulus croaks. "I'm too scared to climb. As much as I want to go, I think I'll just stay here. I think I'm just stuck here, Evan."

"Oh, you can make it to them; you just have to be willing to. You're not stuck, Regulus, not at all. You're just not ready to climb yet," Evan says. "You'll wish you had, though."

"What?" Regulus mumbles, eyebrows furrowing as he rips his gaze from Sirius and James to focus on Evan instead, and his breath punches out of him as soon as he sees the spear impaled through him. Evan seems unperturbed by it, still kicking his legs and resting one arm over the handle of the spear like it's a prop, like he's not bleeding out. "Evan…"

"You're so close," Evan murmurs with a sad sigh. "That's you, isn't it, lover boy? Perpetually close, but never close enough. If only you'd keep climbing…" He shakes his head and gives Regulus a sorrowful smile. "You can't stay here forever. I think you'd know this by now, but eventually branches break."

With a snap, the branch they're on cracks right in the middle between them, and Evan tips backwards, hand outstretched. Regulus remembers flinging himself up as Evan surged forward to catch his hand to pull him up on the branch on the very first day of the games, and he jerks forward thoughtlessly to return the favor. Evan managed to catch him, but now that it's Regulus' turn, he fails. Their hands just graze each other ever so slightly.

Evan falls, and Regulus chokes out his name in immediate horror, starting to tip himself forward, only to be snatched back by his collar. Regulus kicks out and swivels his head, letting loose a helpless, instinctive shriek of pure terror when he sees the spider with Avery's face yanking him further along the branch. Regulus can't get free, and all he can think to do is call out for Sirius, for James, begging them to help him, to help Evan. He screams their names over and over, desperate and loud. James and Sirius never stop laughing together; they never look down to where he is at all.

The spider drags him further, making him shake, and shake, and—and he's being shaken. He's—

The ground rises up to meet him, causing Regulus to roll into the bracing cold, pinning down the give of warmth beneath him. It's moving. It's a threat, shaking him and holding him. Regulus has his dagger to it before he even registers what it is, still hazy and disoriented.

"—gulus," says the warmth as the ringing in Regulus' ears start to fade, the world slowly shifting into focus. It takes a second, but that—it's James. It's James that Regulus is pinning to the floor, a dagger to his throat. James is watching him very carefully, holding very still. "It's me. I promise it's just me."

Regulus doesn't move, eyes darting around as he breathes hard, trying to puzzle reality back together. It takes him a long moment to regulate his breathing and make sense of what's going on; it was a nightmare, not his first and most certainly not his last. Glancing back down, James is still pliant beneath him, finally relaxing completely the moment Regulus meets his eyes. He must see some clarity in them, because the tension drains out of his body, and he gazes up at Regulus with his eyebrows furrowed in obvious concern.

"You were calling out for me and Sirius," James whispers, his eyes full of sorrow.

"Sorry," Regulus says gruffly, carefully pulling his dagger away from James' neck. He's really exhausted and barely has the energy to slip off James' lap where he's straddling him, but he's sure his weight is bothering James' leg, and as much as he jokes, Regulus is almost certain he doesn't *actually* like the fact that he came very close to having his throat sliced open just now.

"Hey, you're fine, stop," James murmurs, reaching out to grip Regulus' hips before carefully sliding his hands to his lower back under the blanket, pressing in and gently encouraging him to fold forward. "Come here, it's okay."

Regulus collapses down into James and buries his face into the crook of his neck, hunched in on himself and making his back into a shell-curve as he does his absolute best to fit his whole body into the circle of James' arms as they come up around him. Usually, the nightmares are something they don't talk about. They both have them, and they both have the decency to wake the other up if they see them afraid in their sleep, but they generally don't acknowledge them. Most of the time, it just leaves them sweaty and resigned and so, so tired.

This time, Regulus can't stop the words that fall out of his mouth in a hushed rush. "Evan was stupid. He was—" Regulus sucks in deep, stuttering breath, blinking rapidly. His voice drops down to a rasp. "He was just so stupid, James. That's why he died. Because he—he wasn't quiet in his tree. People don't look up, not unless they hear a sound that makes them, and he laughed." He swallows harshly, his body held tense as he croaks, "I made him laugh, and that's how he died. How fucking stupid is that? Isn't that just so stupid?"

"Regulus," James says, his voice soft as he rubs his hand up and down Regulus' back.

"I'm not even *funny,"* Regulus chokes out, his face twisting, and then he's clapping his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound that seems to wrench out of him, but it's no use, really.

Things like this can only exist in the dark, in the dead of night where the whole world seems to be in a slumber, that way it's easier to pretend no one can see how he unravels. Regulus tries his best, he really does, but there's genuinely nothing he can do. It just comes pouring out of him, and he wonders why now? Because of the dream? There were so many layers to the dream that Regulus doesn't even bother trying to make sense of them. So, why is he losing it over Evan *now?* Again? He thought he already did this. He can't keep doing this.

That's the thing about grief, Regulus is learning. It doesn't just go away. He doesn't just get to be upset when it happens; he has to go on and be upset for the rest of his life. It's not fair.

He thinks he should have known. After all, he's been familiar with grief since he was fifteen—just not like this. Not death. It's a different grief, a hopeless one. Regulus can still climb to James and Sirius, but Evan? The branch broke, and he's gone.

Why does this always happen to him? Every time, this is what happens to him. Like it's his curse. Regulus gets so close to something he wants, and then it's gone. Never close enough.

Maybe it's stupid, because realistically, Regulus only knew Evan for a handful of days, at most. He didn't know his middle name. He didn't know anything about his family, or his childhood, or what hopes he had for his future. They barely spent more than a day together, all-in-all, and yet it *still* fucking hurts like losing a best friend, even more so because they never got to be. Lost potential is another thing to grieve, and Regulus knows that well by now.

Regulus doesn't need to know more than he already did about Evan to know he trusted him, to know it was easy with him, even in this bottomless abyss of *shit.*

James is murmuring to him. Gentle words. Kind words. All the words that are meant to be soothing. Regulus doesn't listen to them, mostly because he can't hear them over the sound of his own sobs. It's nice of him to do, nonetheless. Of course it is. That's James. He's always so ruthlessly kind.

Regulus lets the background sound of James' voice wash over him, feeling it seep into his skin and go deeper, resonating in his bones until they're strong enough to stop shaking. His tears slowly drift to a stop until he's just breathing into the curve of James' throat, his eyes shut, eyelashes clumped and wet. James has fallen silent, just rubbing his back.

Regulus lifts his head with minimal effort and rasps, "Am I hurting your leg?"

"No, love, you're fine right where you are," James assures him, and Regulus instantly collapses back into him once more, all the fight gone out of him. "I've got you, Regulus. I promise."

"Will you—" Regulus cuts himself off and squeezes his eyes shut, because this, with James, is no different from climbing a tree so tall it scrapes the sky. He gets it. He gets the metaphor now, okay? He understands how it's similar—the fear of falling, the strain of pulling himself up from the safety of the ground he's used to, the sensation of being stuck, the threat of a broken branch that can't hold the weight of what they were, what they are, and all that they could be.

"Anything," James murmurs, and it's like he's leaning down and begging Regulus just to take his hand. James would pull him up; James would never, never drop him. Regulus knows that, and still, that doesn't make the fear go away. "All you have to do is ask, Reg. Whatever you want or need —"

"Your hand—will you—can I have—" Regulus can't figure out how to make his request, because it feels oddly juvenile, and it somehow feels like it's not allowed.

"You want?" James asks, not quite finishing with words, and instead he nearly whacks himself in the face in his haste to literally offer Regulus his hand, so earnest about it.

Regulus can't explain why, but he starts crying again, feeling as fragile as a butterfly's wing. He chokes out a sob and nods helplessly to make it clear that *yes,* he does want, he really does, and then he reaches out to grab James' hand to twine their fingers together. It's awkward and a bit clunky, but Regulus doesn't care. He just ducks his head and starts pressing desperate kisses over their fingers, crying so hard that he's hyperventilating a little bit.

"Is—is that better or worse? I genuinely can't tell," James admits, very blatantly distressed.

Regulus doesn't respond. He isn't sure if he has the words to make it make sense how important James' hand is to him right now. Hands can be tethers that stop you from floating away, pulling you from where you're drifting up into the sky; just the same, they can be the pull you need when you're falling, when you're sinking, when gravity is dragging you down. Regulus was fifteen the first time he held James' hand, and it kept him grounded. Now, it's James' hand that could help him climb, if he'd just let it.

Still weeping, Regulus tucks their joined hands under his chin and curls around them like he's trying to keep them safe in between their bodies. James lets him, keeping his other arm around him, still stroking his back.

In one hand, Regulus clings to James' fingers. In the other, he clings to his dagger. Isn't it sad how they both comfort him? Isn't it sad how he can't fathom letting either go?

Isn't it sad how neither can stop him from being afraid?

~•~

James doesn't go back to sleep, even when Regulus eventually stops crying and drifts off. The way Regulus had been calling out for him, and for Sirius, had scared him so much that he's actually a little terrified to close his eyes. He thinks he's going to have a nightmare about it, and he's already woken up from awful dreams about Vanity and Hodge tonight.

So, he just stays awake. He may have lied to Regulus about his leg, but the ache from the weight of Regulus sitting astride his pelvis—making the injury in his thigh throb—is a small price to pay to

be able to hold him, and comfort him, and be held and comforted by him. Regulus' mere presence is soothing James, helping him with his own grief.

Even when asleep, Regulus doesn't let James' hand go. He keeps their hands trapped between them like someone might come and try to steal them or break them up. James would sooner chew off his own hand to give to Regulus than let anyone take it away from him, at this point.

James isn't entirely sure what Regulus' whole…breakdown was about, really. The nightmare, he's assuming, but he'd also been upset about Evan? He'd also seemed quite desperate to hold hands, then even more upset when they did? Frankly, James doesn't think there needs to be answers or reasons for this sort of thing. Grief manifests in strange ways, and they both have a lot of things to carry grief for. It's not something they just get to put down, not ever. James knows that from his own mother, and from Sirius. If all they can do to help each other is hold on, then James is grateful that they get to.

It was late when Regulus had his nightmare, so it's not long before the temperature starts to change and the night slowly begins to give way to morning. It's still cold, still dark out, but James can see the sky lightening outside the cave. Soon, the river will thaw, which means they need to get up if they want to make it across. They don't know when exactly the ice will melt, but they did agree they didn't want to be trapped here all day with no food or sources of water.

"Reg," James says gently, nudging him a little. This earns little more than a grumpy, displeased grunt that, despite everything, brings a small smile to his lips. He huffs a quiet laugh and squeezes Regulus' hand while using his other hand to nudge him again. "I know you hate it, love, but it's time to get up."

"No," Regulus mumbles and just—snuggles in closer.

"Regulus," James declares, biting back a laugh.

"Don't do this to me, James, please," Regulus whispers-groans, sort of nuzzling into James' shoulder that he's been using as a pillow since he ended up on top of him.

Admittedly, James is so stupidly delighted by the way Regulus wants to lay all over him that he would be willing to let him literally do it forever. However, Regulus would kill him if they got trapped over here when James could have kept it from happening. "We don't know when the river thaws, remember? It's best if we cross it now, so we don't get st—"

A scream splits the air, drowning out the rest of James' words and it has Regulus immediately jerking awake, his head snapping up as he rolls right out of James' lap and to his feet, dagger at the ready. James is right behind him, snatching up his hatchet and bracing the top of it to the ground to help him stumble to his feet. His leg protests, but it hardly even registers as Regulus yanks up his bag to put on, and then they're both heading for the cave entrance.

They make it there at the same time, just about, so James hears Regulus suck in a sharp breath of pure horror even before he fully processes what he's so horrified *by.* James' brain can hardly make sense of it.

Like, he *knows* that it's a huge spider, but where the eyes would usually be, there's a protruding torso that leads into Irene's face, which is framed by sharp, clicking pinchers. The Irene-spider is scuttling behind Peter, Bernice, and Axus, chasing them at frankly *terrifying* speeds while they all shout and run.

All James can think about is how Irene hated spiders. The fact that the gamemakers did this to her —to *anyone,* really—makes him feel fucking sick. All the color has drained from Regulus' face, and he looks like he might vomit as well.

"James!" Peter shrieks, garbling out a desperate screech as he sprints at full-tilt through the field, arms flailing.

"Help! Fucking *help* us!" Bernice screams at them, sounding so terrified that James instinctively *does* want to help her, despite everything that's happened thus far.

"James," Regulus croaks, "the river hasn't thawed. The—fuck, *fuck,* they're leading it right to us!"

"Can we even kill that thing?" James asks incredulously.

Regulus sends him an indignant look. "I don't know!"

"Well," James mutters with a grimace, lifting his hatchet with a deep breath, "only one way to find out."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Regulus groans, flipping his dagger into his palm as James proceeds to run out of the cave.

"Axus, your *hook!"* James bellows as the others draw closer.

"Are you fucking mental?!" Axus shrieks back, nearly slipping on the ice as they come barreling over.

Bernice actually *does* slip, landing on her knees and fully just gliding all the way across like a rockstar or something equally cool, then she uses her sword to brace against the ground and stumble to her feet. "Don't be a bitch, Axus! We have to fight this fucking thing *anyway!* Use your damn hook!"

"Everyone *scatter!"* James roars, and they all instantly split off in multiple different directions, which does seem to confuse the spider for just a split second. The empty poles make it harder for the spider to move. It selects a target, going right for Bernice, who is steadily backing up. "Okay, get behind it!"

"Not yet! Not *yet!"* Bernice orders through clenched teeth, holding one hand out to hold off Axus, who is running along beside the spider, a little behind it, swinging their hook. Bernice's other hand grips her sword, doing that cool swivel thing that Mulciber also knew how to do. In his brief moment of delirious disbelief and panic, James wonders why all the mean people know how to do cool stuff. Even Regulus—

"Now!" Peter shouts.

Axus immediately lets their hook fly, catching the spider all the way across to the other side, embedding in the dip between the torso and the body. Regulus dives forward to grip the rope with Axus, and they both pull, actually managing to throw the spider off course at first, then losing momentum when Axus lashes out and punches Regulus in the face.

"Really?! Is now the time?!" Regulus roars in what James knows is a mixture of disbelief and rage.

To their credit, Axus does wince as they call out, "Sorry! It was a reflex! You're right, that can wait!"

"Fucking *pull,"* Regulus snarls, and then they both do.

"Pete! Help me tackle it!" James bursts out, which spurs him and Peter forward as they essentially just throw themselves at the side to the spider while Axus and Regulus yank it over from the other side. Bernice, from the front, is slashing wildly with her sword, keeping herself from being eaten.

The spider wobbles with a hiss, then tilts over, crumbling on its side. James immediately raises his hatchet and slams it down into one of the spider's legs, the grotesque crunch and snap ringing in his ears. The spider writhes, trying to get up, but Axus and Regulus continue to yank it over every time. Peter stoops down and grips the twitching leg James is chopping off, gagging even as he does it, but he doesn't let how disgusting it is stop him from tugging on the leg with all his might until James breaks through and it pulls apart.

This doesn't go over well with the spider, predictably. It hisses shrilly and flails on the ground, striking out wildly at Bernice. It's getting harder to keep it down, and James knows it's not going to stay put much longer.

"I have an insane idea," James gasps out to Peter, whipping towards him with his chest heaving. Peter is staring down at the spider leg in his hands in pure disgust. "Peter!"

"Oh, oh, that is *nasty,"* Peter chokes out, dropping the leg and shuddering in revulsion. He looks up with wide eyes. "What? Wait, what idea? James—"

"Give me a boost," James declares, reaching out to brace his hand on Peter's shoulder.

Peter gapes at him. "You are *mental."*

Nonetheless, he threads his fingers together and makes a platform between his palms, holding steady as James puts his foot in it and does three little bounces before pushing himself up and throwing himself up onto the body of the spider. He nearly goes right over the side, and for a second, the only thing he can see is Regulus' face red from exertion, his eyes wide and his mouth dropped open as he realizes James is *on* the spider at the moment. James manages a quick, lopsided grin.

"James, you fucking idiot, *get down!"* Regulus shouts.

"One second, love!" James shouts back with a cackle that sounds more like Sirius than him, actually. Weirdly, he hasn't felt this alive and exhilarated in *days.*

With a grunt, he shifts to wriggle up to where he can see his feet under him. Don't spiders have hair? Some of them do, right? Vanity would know, and the passing thought steals the smile right off James' face. Either way, *this* spider has no hair; it's body and legs are made of something that feels like leather or rubber, or both, and there's no easy way to grip it.

Still, James gets his balance enough to crawl forward and bury his hatchet in the back of the spider's torso. The discomfort from the fact that it's *Irene's* torso is overshadowed by the horrible hiss the spider releases, the sound of the pinchers clicking rapidly in distress. The arms flail, trying to reach back and snatch the hatchet out. James beats it there, yanking it free and standing to full height to grip the spider by the back of its hair—Irene's hair—to hold it in place as he swings his hatchet with all his might at the side of its neck.

That only really distracts it, honestly, but Bernice provides assistance by darting forward to shove her sword right through its torso. James snatches the hatchet back out while it's held in place, then brings it back down.

He does it again.

And again.

And again.

And once more for good measure, which finally slices all the way through to the other side, making the spider's head quite literally roll off its shoulders. Irene's head, except not, which becomes apparent when the head hits the ground by Bernice's feet with a dull thud, black eyes glazed over and pinchers still.

The spider slumps all at once, still twitching, and James goes stumbling right over the side with a grunt, not at all prepared to be displaced so abruptly. He hits the ground with a groan, his hatchet skittering from his hand, across the grass. As luck would have it, he has fortunately not fallen at Regulus' feet, which means he won't have to see Regulus glaring at him for doing something so reckless. James is taking his wins.

"James?" Regulus calls.

"I'm okay," James wheezes. "Ow."

"Ow? That doesn't *sound* okay, James," Regulus snaps.

"No, no, I'm completely fine," James insists weakly, breathing hard. "Just, ya know, taking a moment to really appreciate the authenticity of this artificial grass. Honestly, I'm grand."

Regulus releases a huff. "You are so fucking *stupid.* That was incredibly reckless! You could have —"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," James mutters, pushing up to his hands and knees with a grunt. Oh, his leg is *not* happy with him right now. "Have a go at me. Don't thank me or anything. It's always *you're so stupid, James;* it's never *you looked so sexy and heroic while saving everyone from the murderous spider, James."*

Usually, Regulus would have a bitchy comment lined up for him, but he's suspiciously quiet all of a sudden. James reaches forward for his hatchet, only to freeze when a boot comes down to step on the handle before he can grab it. Slowly, James tilts his head up to see who it is and feels his heart sink right to the pit of his stomach.

"Peter?" James whispers, a lump forming in his throat, a horrible dread turning his veins to ice.

Peter sighs and slips his foot back, crouching down to pick up the hatchet. He looks at James for a long moment, then swallows and murmurs, "I'm sorry, James."

"No," James croaks. "No, Pete, tell me you're not—tell me you aren't working with—"

"Us?" Bernice whispers in his ear, swinging her head around to grin at him, eyes sparkling. He jerks a little bit, and she laughs at him. "Ol' Petey fits right in, he does. He's a smart biscuit, if you really give him a chance. Shame he never got to prove himself while spending all his time with perfect, pure, principled *Potter.* That's alright, *we* appreciate him."

"Make that mistake, I *dare* you," Regulus hisses from behind him, and Axus chuckles. "When I get that back—"

"Shut up, Black, you're the one who threw the dagger at me to start with," Axus cuts in. "Got me in

the arm good, you prick."

"Like I said, wait until I get my other one back," Regulus snaps, then makes a quiet, displeased sound.

"Yeah, there you go," Axus declares, and then they say nothing else, and neither does Regulus.

Peter once again swallows harshly and there's true remorse in his eyes. "James, you—you have to understand. I want to go home, too. I want to—"

"That doesn't make it *right,"* James chokes out.

"Oh, yeah?" Peter challenges, nostrils flaring. "I *told* you, James. This is the hunger games! It's—it's *war,* and you do what you have to do to survive a war. We can't always do the right thing, and you're a fucking hypocrite, you know that? What would *you* have done to get home? I would have had to die for that to be possible, and you know it. So, what was your solution? Kill me? Betray me? Go on, then."

James doesn't have anything to say, because he doesn't know. He still doesn't know. He never did, and he doesn't think he would have ever figured it out. That, James imagines, would have been something Regulus would have needed to handle. Things were so much easier back when he believed he wouldn't have to live with his own choices.

"Yeah," Peter says sharply. "That's what I thought. You can think I'm a bad person all you want, and you can hate me, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm only the one in the wrong because I beat you to it first."

All James can think to say is, "I never would have done this to you, Peter."

"So, you would have died for me, then?" Peter asks.

"I would have at least wanted to," James rasps, his eyes stinging, because it's true. In another world where Regulus' name was never called but James' still was, he doesn't think he would have made it home anyway. He would have died for someone. Vanity or Peter, most likely. "A part of me still wants to. Will you even mourn me?"

Peter flinches slightly, and again, his eyes fill with remorse, shiny in the rising sun. They stare at each other, and James wasn't aware that heartbreak took this form as well. He's never been through anything like this, where he realized that his life didn't matter to someone else the way he thought it did, the way their life matters to him.

"Oh, enough of all the melodrama," Bernice mutters, sounding bored. She grips James by the back of his hair and yanks him to his feet, putting her sword to his throat. He can feel the curl of her smile against his ear. "Peter's going to kill you, and I've been looking forward to your death for a long time, Potter."

"You know, I sort of got that impression," James admits, wincing as she snatches him around, turning him to face—oh. Shit. "Oh, *fuck no.* Regulus—"

"I'm fine," Regulus grits out, the words barely intelligible with how hard he's clenching his teeth together. Axus has the dagger Regulus apparently threw at them pressed to his throat, their lips pulled up into a smirk. The one Regulus had is on the ground where he can't grab it.

"Let him go," James blurts out instinctively, ready and willing to fight, or plead, or do *anything* to get Regulus out of this situation. He swallows, careless to the sword at his own throat.

"Not sure you should be too worried about him, pumpkin," Bernice tells him, amused. "You two are just *so* sweet, do you know that? Really, it's very adorable. Don't worry, we'll make sure you can say goodbye and have a heart-to-heart and share a cute little kiss before we kill you. We're not *monsters."*

"I'd really like to know your definition of monster," James grumbles under his breath as Bernice drags him over to where Axus and Regulus are. Curiously, the spider is just—gone, as if it dissolved on the spot. The gamemakers' doing, no doubt.

"Listen, I have a heart, alright? I think you two make for a lovely couple," Bernice announces, sounding absurdly serious as she kicks the backs of his knees to get him to kneel down while Axus does the same to Regulus right across from him. "Now, make your goodbyes, give your speeches. Go on."

Always got to have a good show, giving the viewers what they want. Even they know how this goes, because they're in it, too, putting on their own performances. James isn't in the mood, so he doesn't look at Regulus. No, he looks at Peter.

"Peter," James whispers, looking up at him with this stupid ache in his chest. The worst part is, he's not even angry. More than anything, he's just *hurt.* He trusted Peter not to let him down; he *needed* Peter not to let him down. But that's not how the world works, is it? That's not how the story goes, right?

"Don't look at me like that, James," Peter chokes out. "Do you think this is how I wanted it to go? When—when they found me at the third fire, I brought them back because I thought we would be able to handle it. We outnumbered them, and all of you had weapons, so why didn't it work? What went *wrong?* Because it wasn't me. I did *everything* I was supposed to, and you still—you let her *die.* We were supposed to protect her!"

"I tried," James rasps, tears building in his eyes.

"You didn't try hard enough," Peter says, and his voice cracks. His face sags with regret. "I—I didn't either. It was my fault, James. I brought them there. I thought—I didn't mean for that to happen. I thought you would save me."

"I didn't know," James tells him softly, his chest feeling far too tight. He can barely breathe. "I would have, Pete, if I could have. I'm sorry that I couldn't."

"Now I have to save myself," Peter declares, his own eyes glittery and bright with tears. "I didn't even think I would make it this far. I just want to go home, and the worst part is, I don't even know where that is anymore, because it felt like it was with you, and Vanity, and Irene, and Mathias, and even your scary fucking boyfriend. So, where do I go from here?"

James swallows. "I don't know. I never knew the answer to that. It's on you to figure it out now. The truth is, I never could. That's your burden to bear."

Again, Peter flinches back, his eyes widening slightly, and he turns away as he sucks in a deep breath. James lets his gaze fall to Regulus, who is looking at him with genuine sadness. He knew. He *knew* this would happen, and he tried to save James from the pain of it, but James refused to listen.

"Can you two kiss and cry already?" Axus demands, waving their hand between Regulus and James.

"No," Regulus says shortly.

"No?" Bernice checks, keeping her sword right where it is, pressed under James' chin. "Potter, don't you have anything you want to say to him?"

"He knows," James murmurs, meeting Regulus' eyes, seeing them and knowing them as he always has. What Regulus knows is the same thing James knows, all of which have very little to do with their little love story and everything to do with how neither of them are planning to die like this. Not here, not now, not this close, not without a fucking fight.

"Well, that's…disappointing," Bernice mumbles.

"Yes, life generally is," Regulus replies blandly, and then he tosses his weight back against Axus enough to make them stumble, the both of them tumbling backwards. He fumbles to knock the dagger out of Axus' hand and actually manages it, the both of them rolling around on the ground.

"Shit!" Bernice bursts out, once again yanking James to his feet to drag him out of range. "Okay, no more playing around. Kill him, Axus! And you, Peter, kill Potter."

Peter is frozen in place, his eyes wide as Bernice jerks James by his hair, holding him still. Their eyes meet, and the whole world seems to shrink down to this one moment.

A thousand things seem to flash between them, all at once. Their first meeting, when Peter—scared and resigned—admitted that he didn't expect to live past the first day. And James was there to reach out and offer help, to offer friendship, as if there was no possibility that they'd end up right here. But here they are, and survival is about will. It's about reason. You have to want to survive to survive, and that means bearing all that comes with continuing on.

It could be seconds or years before Peter whispers, "I can't bear it," and flings the hatchet to the side, where it skitters out of range. Bernice releases a shout of anger, just as Peter comes barreling right at them both. They all go down in a tangle of limbs, knocked off their feet. James gets hit in the face with the hilt of the sword, but he's mercifully not cut.

There's a grunt, and then James is kicked *hard* in the back, making him roll away from where Bernice and Peter are fighting. Then, with no warning, there's a horrible shout from Peter that has James hastily jumping to his feet. Bernice's sword is stabbed through Peter's stomach where he's bent over her, and he chokes out a harsh breath as he pulls himself back, but he doesn't fall. Instead,

he grabs Bernice by her hair, stumbling and coughing up blood as he hauls her up to her feet and gets both arms around her.

James feels it hit him only a second later what that means, and he tries to change course mid-stumble, frantically whipping around to see Peter lifting Bernice clear off her feet as she kicks and screeches and fights to get away, but his hold is unrelenting. Even when she slices at his forearms with her sword, he just keeps right on going.

"No! Peter, no! My baby! Please, you know about my baby! My baby!" Bernice shrieks. "Don't! Fuck you, you fucking traitor, you fucking *rat!"*

"Wait," James breathes out, shakily running forward as his mind races, because the sun is up and it's warm out, and not again, not again, please not again. "Peter! *Peter!"*

James tries to save him. Despite everything, he still tries to save him. Even though Peter did betray him, even though he would only be putting off the inevitable of the burden neither of them want to bear, James can't stop himself from trying. He tries, and just like with Vanity, he fails.

Peter quite literally body-slams Bernice right into the river, which has thawed some time recently. They go in with a splash, and hands raise up instantly to drag them beneath the surface. Bernice is screaming when she goes under. Peter is quiet. They disappear together, and James skids to a halt, breathing hard as he stares at the water with tears in his eyes.

Peter wanted to go home, but didn't know where that was.

He'll never find out.

~•~

As soon as Bernice starts screaming, Axus is thrown off their game, which means Axus is quite easy to get away from when the splash echoes over to them.

In other words, Regulus gets to punch Axus in the face, which is *very* satisfying, frankly. Axus is so distracted by everything that's going on—the possible deaths of their last remaining allies—that it's easy to push them off of him, both of them rolling apart. Axus stops close to the dagger they dropped, and Regulus stops next to James' hatchet. They both instantly dive for them at the same

time, grabbing their weapons and launching to their feet.

Around two minutes after the initial splash, there's two cannons, one right after the other. Axus whips their head to the side, and so does Regulus to see James standing on the edge of the river, his hands limp by his sides.

"Two to one," Regulus murmurs, drawing Axus' gaze. They still have his dagger, but he still has the hatchet, and his last dagger is so close to him—

"Ha!" Axus grins at him. "More one to one, I'd say. Potter's no threat. I'll deal with him easily."

Clearly, they intend to prove this, because they whip around and start running right for James. Regulus panics as he shouts James' name like it's being ripped from his soul, raising the hatchet and flinging it through the air without missing a beat, scrambling to grab his last dagger in case he needs to throw that, too. He doesn't. The hatchet lands true, burying itself right in Axus' back and making them shout in pain as they stumble forward, unsteady on their feet.

At the shout, James whips around in enough time to brace himself as Axus trips into him. Regulus freezes, holding his breath, watching in what feels like slow motion as they collide. James releases a punched-out sound, hands bracing against Axus' arms, and then he twists to the side and shoves Axus right into the water.

A splash.

Pale hands rising.

Silence.

A minute.

Two minutes.

The cannon.

Regulus exhales, his eyes fluttering shut as he deflates all at once, choking out a harsh breath that's somewhere between a sob and a laugh. That's it. Oh, that's *it.* They did it. They fucking did it. It's just them, and they can *go home.* Regulus is shaking from head-to-toe, and his ears ring as he waits for the announcement that they're the Victors.

And waits.

And waits.

And waits.

Slowly, Regulus' eyes peel open. James is still facing the river, his head tilted up as he looks at the sky like there might be answers there. Regulus wants him to turn and look at him, face him with a reassuring smile that can stop the fear crawling through him right in its tracks.

Suddenly, Regulus would give anything for James' optimism. They made it, didn't they? Why are they still here? They did everything right. They played the stupid games and followed the rules. They—

"Attention tributes," comes Slughorn's voice, and Regulus goes very still, "the rule change allowing two Victors from the same district has now been…revoked. There can only be one Victor. May the odds be ever in your favor…"

The silence is deafening. Regulus can hear himself breathing, but he's not sure how he is. Oh, he's so stupid. How could he have let himself believe, even for a moment? Regulus Black, daring to trust anything that's too good to be true, just because he wanted to believe in it so much that he wouldn't even let himself doubt it. He let himself *care* about James, he let himself think—let himself *hope*—

This.

This is why Regulus is afraid to climb. This is why Regulus stays on the ground, because branches always break. Every time, he gets so close, so fucking close…

Never close enough.

Almost casually, James rolls his head to the side to look at him, a strain around his eyes. He doesn't turn away from the sunrise, doesn't do anything other than glance over at Regulus with a small smile. It's a sad one. His eyes flick down to the dagger in Regulus' hand, then right back up to hold his gaze.

"You're hesitating, love," James says softly.

Regulus releases a rattling breath. He hasn't even raised his dagger. He's trembling. His vision is blurring. This is it, isn't it? The real test. Because it's just them now, the last two, and James is the only thing standing between him and home. He's always said he would do what he had to, always said he would kill James if that's what it came to. Without hesitation.

And yet.

The truth—the horrible, ugly, gut wrenching truth—is that Regulus can't. He thought—he *really* thought he would, he thought he *could,* if that's what it came down to; that's an easy thing to believe when he was so sure it wouldn't come down to that. But here they are, and Regulus was wrong.

"I—I can't," Regulus chokes out, and the dagger falls from his grip to land on the ground, never to be picked up again. He won't pick it up. "James, I *can't."*

James' face softens, and his gaze is so warm, despite the pain that tightens the corner of them. His lips curl up further, and he murmurs, "That's okay, Regulus."

"No, it's not," Regulus croaks. "Nothing about this is okay. I can't do it. I can't kill you. I—James, I __"

"Shh, don't worry about it. You don't have to," James whispers, slowly turning to face him.

Regulus' gaze trails down to where James is cupping his stomach, blood pouring through the crevices of his fingers, spilling over his hand. "James?"

"Axus got me on their way into the water. At least it was your dagger, I suppose," James says with a weary chuckle, his throat bobbing on a harsh swallow. His mouth quirks up a bit at the corner, gentle and lovely. "Maybe this makes me insane, but if I'm honest, I wish it had been you."

The world drops right out from under Regulus' feet, and there's nothing that could bring it back to him. He's unsteady, coming apart at the seams, everything crumbling around him until nothing makes sense. James holds his gaze, and then he falls to the ground, his legs giving out underneath him.

The sun is still rising. It goes up, even as James goes down. Regulus waits for it to explode. Regulus waits for it to go out, to dim and shrink and burn itself up, dying as James does.

It doesn't.

Chapter End Notes

more in-depth warning for those of you who need to be spoiled/prepared: james and regulus go back to the original cave, and they stay the night. the next morning, axus and peter and bernice are chased to the cave by yet another hallow-made spider (like avery, except this time it's irene), and the last five remaining have to come together to kill it. peter has joined the death eaters, but when it comes time to kill james, he can't do it. instead, he fights bernice—who stabs him with her sword—and then he throws both of them into the crimson river. meanwhile, regulus and axus are fighting. when bernice and peter die, axus decides to target james with the dagger that regulus threw at them, like, four chapters ago. regulus throws james' hatchet and hits them in the back, and they stumble into james, who turns and tosses them into the river. james and regulus are not announced victors; instead it's announced that the rule change is changed back and there can only be one. regulus admits he can't kill james, but james says he doesn't have to and turns to reveal that axus stabbed them on the way into the river.

for those who have finished the chapter...

Well, That Didn't Happen In The Books/Movies i just KNOW some of yall are like: zar, wtf do you think you're doing? but listen. hear me out, okay? im gonna need everyone to just trust the process.

that was one bitch of a cliffhanger, though, not gonna lie. you're so valid if you want to tear your hair out, actually. or mine. (just a reminder to those who need it, those who have had a POV will not die)

anyway, i led in with a false sense of security again, i think, because james and regulus seemed to be in better moods at the start. a little flirting, a little mutual daydreaming about A Happy Life Together. no, because i think it's important to note that regulus believes his "other life" with james is happy and safe, and they have a home together

entirely different to the kind of home he grew up in. like okay, ill just go dunk my head in a bucket of acid, nbd. the bookshelf??? the flowers???? the secret love notes?????

and so we see evan again. well, "see" is a bit of a strong word, but you get my point. it was never going to be one of those things where someone dies, it's very sad, and then it's not really mentioned again. like no, this shit is going to Haunt Them. there's really no way around that. but trust evan to show up in regulus' dreams and talk in metaphors and shit before dramatically reenacting his own death lmaoooo

another thing i wanted to cover: peter. i have been very tight-lipped about peter this entire time for this very reason. because, in this setting, he is not and never was the Bad Guy. like, he never intended to betray his friends or get anyone killed; he thought that the others save him. just didn't quite work out for...anyone, basically. he cared about vanity and james just as much as the rest of them did, and he got fully immersed into the arena just as they all have.

however, peter DID intend to "betray" james after the rule change, by going to join the death eaters. i use the term "betray" lightly in the sense that He Is Valid For Doing That, from a survival standpoint. still, the parallels to canon is heartbreaking, which was The Point. i do think that if it came down to it, peter wouldn't have been able to look james in the eye and kill him—not unless you're characterizing him as Actually Evil, which is fair to do in a canon setting, honestly, if that's your interpretation. but in this setting, it's a little different. anyway, there's more about that later. it's one of those complex things where some people are gonna hate him, fullstop, and others are gonna feel bad for him, while some won't even care, and ya know what? all of it is valid.

"you're hesitating, love" now james potter, why would you say that? ☹ the way i can make even the seemingly most innocuous things sad... why am i the way that i am? no, because i know a lot of you were expecting the rule change to be changed back, but the way regulus was so fucking upset about it.

and then james getting stabbed and being like: hey babe don't even worry about it, ive just solved all your problems. like james??? honey, no, that's not how it works! forgive him, he was just stabbed, so he's likely in a bit of shock 😔

(oh, also, side note: i said last chapter that we're close to the end, and i meant that as in we're almost to the end of the 84th hunger games. no, there's...a lot of fic left)

anyway, let me do...numbers....i guess...

tributes remaining: 2
james
regulus

(idk thats kinda redundant, but it felt like i had to do it, ya know? just a full circle kinda thing)

ANYWAY! sadly, i do leave you all with a two day wait after this, because i won't be posting again until tuesday!

UPDATING ON TUESDAY

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!